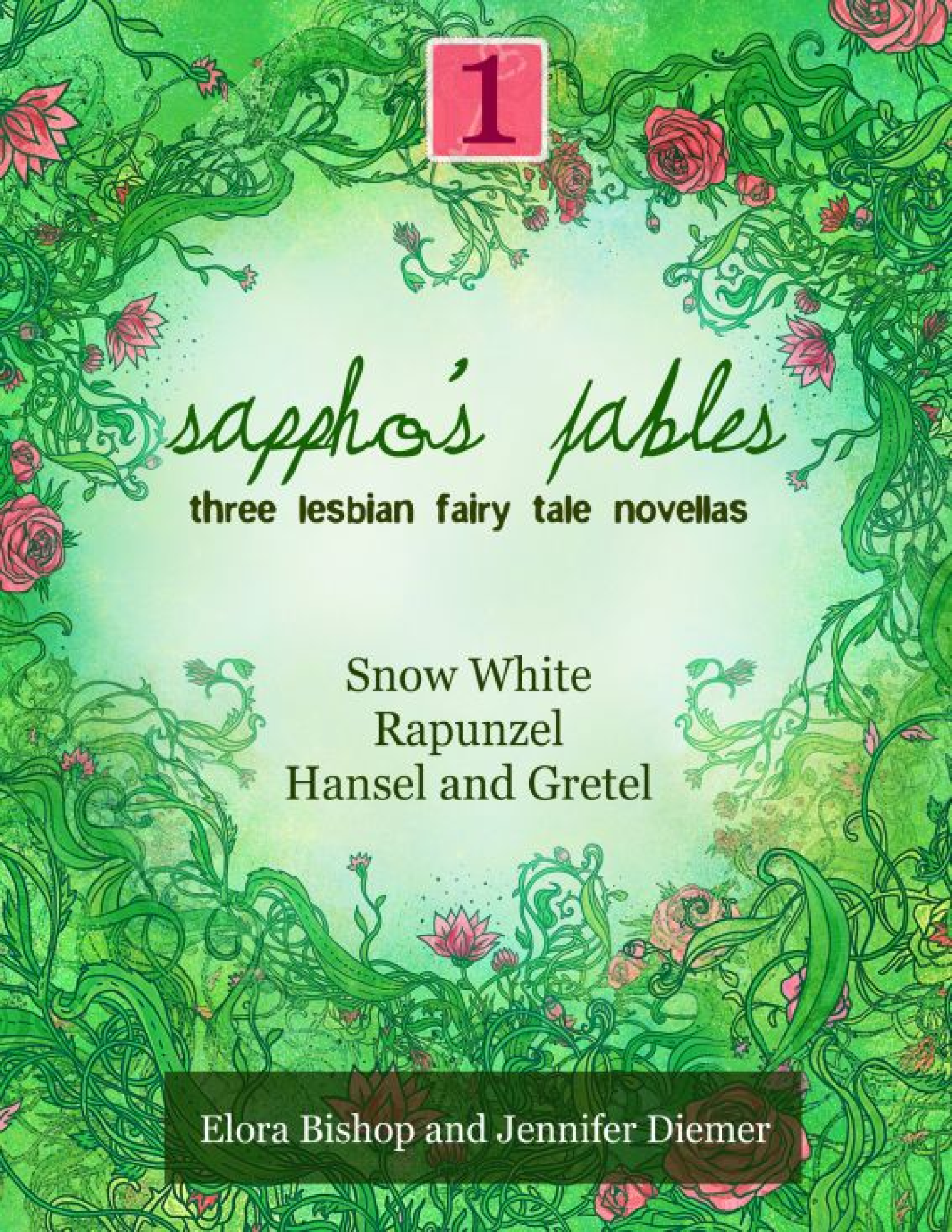




1

sappho's fables

three lesbian fairy tale novellas

Snow White
Rapunzel
Hansel and Gretel

Elora Bishop and Jennifer Diemer

Sappho's Fables

Volume 1

Three Lesbian Fairy Tale Novellas

By Elora Bishop and Jennifer Diemer

Copyright 2012 Elora Bishop and Jennifer Diemer

Smashwords Edition

All rights reserved

Smashwords License Statement

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

For Rachel:

*Your support, love and kindness
has given us wings.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the insight, generosity and kindness of Jennifer Adam, Tara Taylor and Bree Zimmerman, this book would have been a pale shadow of what it has become. Their attention to detail and support have been invaluable in the creation of Sappho's Fables. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your friendship, your editing prowess and your esteemed awesomeness.

This volume is dedicated to Rachel Melcher, who has supported our stories and our dreams constantly and wholly since their very inception. Our lives have evolved and become beautiful

through her unending belief that we are capable of great magic. Her friendship is a precious, cherished gift. We love you!

Thank you to Madeline Claire Franklin and Laura Diemer: support, love and awesome doesn't begin to cover it.

There are many more beautiful people than we have space to list, who we appreciate immensely, who make our writing lives (and life in general) a joy. You know who you are. We love you. Thank you for reminding us that magic exists outside of fairy tales.

Introduction

Once upon a time, two girls fell in love... Unfortunately, their kingdoms were very far apart. So, in the beginning, all they had were love letters and stories written by starlight, sent back and forth across the miles. Now, both young women knew the old fairy stories—backwards and forwards, word for word. But within these tales, the prince was always the hero, and two princesses never fell in love. In a sad, bleak time without one another, they longed for a comforting, familiar tale about girls like them: in love. So, stubborn and determined as these ladies were wont to be, they decided to take it upon themselves to change the stories.

When our relationship began, one of the deepest things we had in common was our obsession with fairy tales. To help us cope with the pain of a long-distance relationship, we retold our favorite fairy tales as gifts to one another, reclaiming them from a lesbian point of view. These were the stories we had wished for growing up, as we read and reread our worn, beloved volumes, always seeking someone like us, always failing to find her. Telling each other these changed fairy tales gave us hope that someday we would be able to be together.

Much has changed since then. We now live the fairy tale life we wished for all along. If you had told us almost ten years ago that we would be legally married, that legal gay marriage would exist, it would have been as difficult for us to believe as the most unlikely of fairy stories. But dreams and happily ever afters have been coming true for queer men and women everywhere. We no longer live in a world where fairy tales are the straight person's privilege, so it only makes sense that the tales begin to reflect the deeper truths of our culture, as they were meant to do so long ago.

So we began to write Sappho's Fables together.

These are not the stories we wrote long ago, though there are some distant hints within them from the stories of our past. We wanted Sappho's Fables to be some of the best of what we, as authors, are capable of. We chose well-known fairy tales, but gave them unique elements. There are many fairy tale retellings in the world, and we wanted ours to add more to the genre than just changing the sexes of some princes!

These are not your typical fairy tales, in more ways than one.

Fairy tales, at their best, are often dark, many-layered windows into the human spirit. They whisper warnings to us, that we can heed or ignore, and they tell us that beyond the quest and the castle and the beast, lies an inherent beauty and magic in the everyday. They tell us that hope is not a waste, that with a little bit of luck and love and magic, things can turn out all right. May, in fact, turn into a happily ever after.

As lesbians, we deserve those happily ever afters, too, and straight people need to see our stories as many-layered, vibrant and magical things. No matter who are you, or why you are reading this volume, we hope that you will see, at the end, that women can save themselves, and that love is beautiful, no matter what shape it comes in.

Sappho's Fables has been one of the most rewarding and joyous experiences we've ever had—especially working on the stories together has been amazing. Thank you for supporting our work, our stories and these, our retold fairy tales. We appreciate your enthusiasm more than words can express, and we hope you enjoy.

Warmly,

Jennifer Diemer and Elora Bishop
May, 2012

Seven

A Lesbian Snow White

by Jennifer Diemer

I slipped off my robe, sat down on the edge of the bed, and opened my mouth. Without a word, he slid the fruit from his knife onto my tongue; then he sliced a piece of the apple for himself.

We chewed slowly, avoiding one another's gaze. It was a communion of sorts, and our most intimate act, but I did not know why, every night, we enacted this ritual. I'd stopped wondering months ago, had stopped asking him questions long before that.

And it was only a bite of apple, I reasoned with myself. In truth, this nocturnal habit was the least of my husband's oddities.

The thin apple skin broke again and again between my teeth; the fruit was so sweet that I winced as I swallowed. With a shiver, I fell back upon my pillow and pulled the coverlet over my body. I was careful not to touch Lexander—he disliked being touched—as he eased into the bed beside me. He exhaled heavily before blowing out his candle. Smoke and apples: my life's perfume.

I stared at the darkness, listened to my breaths, his breaths.

Silence wounds. I have learned that, living here. Silence is not peace; it is its opposite, a spiritual unease, an unrepentant stifling.

I curled up small as a nestling and slipped my head beneath the blankets, eyes squeezed shut. I willed my dreams to fly me away.

*

When we married, I was scarcely older than his child, his daughter, Neve.

I knew nothing of the world, having grown up an indoor creature. I spent my infancy with a wet nurse and my school years with indifferent—sometimes cruel—governesses. My parents were grey silhouettes on the

walls of rooms I peeked into but was not permitted to enter. I knew them best by their scents, hovering like ghosts in the empty hallways, on the staircase: my father's cherry pipe tobacco, my mother's violet toilette water.

They chose Lexander for me, though they knew nothing about him, save for his title and his monetary worth. I had a respectable dowry, but it was nothing to tempt a man of his stature, and my beauty, I knew, could offer little temptation. Not that he had ever glimpsed my face.

Still, his correspondence with my father confirmed that he wished to make a match with me. All of these arrangements were made ethereally, invisibly. It felt make-believe, as if I were marrying a ghost.

Lexander lived in distant Avella, an isolated country to the north. Avella was thick with forests and even thicker with fairy stories. When I was small, my governess Tendrille, an Avellan emigrant, liked to frighten me with tales of the infamous Avellan witches, and of beasts who made bargains with desperate men. After her bedtime storytelling, I was always afraid that a treeman might leap from my wardrobe, moss for his hair and branches for arms, come from Avella to steal my heart away. And yet part of me longed to see such wonders—real magic!—with my own eyes, so I listened rapt to Tendrille's harsh whispers, and sometimes, secretly, I put on my black veil and whispered made-up words to the moon, pretending to be a witch.

Neither of my parents had ever traveled so far as Avella, and neither ever would. When I bid them farewell, I knew I would not see them again. My mother gave me a gold-framed mirror to remember her by. A wedding present, she said. It was the loveliest gift I had ever received; I wrapped it in a silk cloth to protect the delicate roses that encircled its surface, and I refused to let the footman take it from me when I stepped into Lexander's carriage.

I was such an eager, hopeful thing. For the journey to Avella, I wore my most flattering dress, the white one with blue lace at the cuffs and hem, and my brown curls were decorated with sprigs of holly—for domestic happiness—and a trailing vine of ivy, to promote affection. I was a rosy-cheeked, self-absorbed bride; I watched the countryside glide by through the carriage window and imagined that it had beautified itself for my sake alone, riotous with yellow and pink and purple flowers.

I'm ashamed to admit I accepted the marriage proposal eagerly. Here was my chance at an adventure. Perhaps love. Companionship. I had never

had a friend, or a kiss. Loneliness and I, however, were intimate.

*

Lexander was older than they told me, much older. We were married hurriedly, privately, by a nervous clergyman in a small, dark room. I had no time to change my dress or wash up after my carriage ride. There was no formal introduction. There were no witnesses. Lexander kissed me just once, to seal our contract. I had dreamt of the marriage kiss—my first kiss—since the arrival of his letter confirming our betrothal. But my husband's mouth was closed and hard. His rheumy eyes drifted, lofty, never meeting my gaze.

Not one week into my marriage—if such a circumstance may be called a marriage—I found myself longing for the life I had so readily sacrificed. After a full month had passed, I began to ponder escape. We lived far outside the village, removed from sight of any other inhabitants. Still, there were horses, servants I might bribe. I had no belongings to offer them, though, besides some dresses and my mother's mirror. Lexander had never given me a ring.

I confronted him, in the beginning, asked him why he had chosen me, since it did not seem as if he wanted me at all.

"It is not a matter of want but of necessity."

"I am your wife, but you treat me terribly. What have I done to deserve this?"

"You mustn't mistake detachment for dislike, Catalina. I provide food for you, and shelter. What more do you need?"

I could not answer, did not *know* the answer—not precisely. I had hoped for freedom, but instead I found myself caught in another cage.

Still, I did not despise him, not at first. Some part of me held on to the fancy that perhaps, given time and care, our affection would grow. He was old enough to be my grandfather, but it was not so uncommon for a wealthy man to take a young bride, and though I knew I could never love him in the way that a wife loves a husband, was it naïve to imagine that we might be friends?

But Lexander ignored my attempts at kindness, spoke to me only when it was unavoidable, or when he wanted something from me. He was an alchemist, an odd hobby for a man of his wealth, and on frequent

occasions, he asked me—and, eventually, threatened me—to submit to innumerable, nonsensical tests.

It was my duty as his wife, he said. He asked nothing else of me, he said. He took care of me; I was free to live a life of leisure, without worries or responsibilities. All he asked, he said, was that I be compliant in this "one small matter."

When I refused—and I did refuse, many times—he raged and punished me in a hundred different ways: ordering the cook to ban me from the kitchen and prepare me no meals; locking me up in our chamber for hours, sometimes a day, sometimes longer; sprinkling my half of the nightly apples with peppers and powders that made me wretchedly ill.

So, more often than not, I swallowed my urge to protest and did as he bade me. It seemed easier, somehow.

His tests were tests of pain, of endurance. He took me to his laboratory below the castle and strapped me to long-armed mechanisms that pulled and pinched. He drew my blood with thick, dull needles. He measured my bruises and, in cold, clinical words, instructed me to describe how I felt afterward, to describe the depth of the pain.

In truth, it did not take long for my hopes to sour, and I could never seem to remove their bitterness from my mouth.

*

Since I hated him, I hated his daughter, too. My stepdaughter, Neve. She did not resemble him in any way, with her dark hair, her fair—almost white—skin, her unnerving green-eyed gaze. I supposed she took after her mother, but there were no portraits hanging in the drafty halls of any of my husband's former wives. The paintings he commissioned were abstract scenes thick with red and green and black oil paint, suggestive of broken trees, of earthy carnage.

I felt Neve's stare physically, like a bite. Sometimes, when I wandered the grounds, a sensation overcame me, a prickling alarm, and I turned back to the house to find her watching me from her chamber window. But when we met indoors, we rarely exchanged a word. I had acquired a habit of keeping my chin down to discourage conversation. Some of the servants were chatty, and I had no inclination to socialize. Even

mundane topics like the dreary weather and the proliferation of mice in the hallways were too involved for me.

I had one solace, and that was the orchard. Decades ago, before Lexander inherited the estate, someone had planted hundreds of apple trees in neat rows, so that the branch of one tree met the branch of its neighboring tree, creating a sweetly scented bower beneath. It was a fairy place, my hiding place, though I was no more hidden there than anywhere. Still, I liked to lie on the grass, on the hard fallen apples, and imagine myself a simple country girl with my own cottage in the woods.

There was one grove of trees I was not permitted to enter. It was Lexander's alone, and it was, I knew, where the apples we shared every night came from. The servants picked them from the branches, left them in crates in our chamber. A circle of stones separated these trees—so heavy with fruit that their thick, twisted branches grazed the ground—from the ordinary trees. Their revered apples grew half red and half white; I supposed them to be a rare Avellan breed, as I had never seen any apples like them in my country.

One afternoon I was sitting high in the crook of my favorite tree in the greater orchard—a very old tree, gnarled as my husband's fingers—and I heard footsteps, whispers, excited girlish laughter. I sighed and moved further along the branch, into the shadows.

Many of the servants had sweethearts in the nearest village, and the orchard offered privacy of a sort, so they trysted there from time to time. The sight of their furtive gropings made me feel uneasy. I never watched and tried not to eavesdrop. If they noticed my presence, they did not comment on it, so I had grown accustomed to waiting, silent, eyes closed, until the orchard was empty and all mine again.

My first glance of this couple, though, brought a wobble to my insides that I couldn't reconcile, and I found myself leaning forward for a better view.

Neve had her back to me, three yards away. She was dressed all in black, black gown and bodice, and from behind I recognized her night-sky hair, her tapered waist and curved hips. Her hand clasped the hand of a girl whose name I couldn't remember—Maria, Marian? I knew she worked in the lower kitchens, scrubbing dishes, and even from here, I could see how raw her fingers were.

How rough they must have felt against Neve's smooth skin.

Scarcely had the thought formed than I was blushing, because now Neve had let go the maid's hand and was touching her—first, gently, the girl's plain, flushed face, framed in limp hair the color of apple flesh. Then Neve's fingers moved downward to graze parted lips; the maid's neck, arching back; her collarbone. And there she paused, bent her head, pressed her lips to the heaving place between throat and breast.

Maria/Marian moaned, and the sound startled me so much that I forgot my precarious roost, lost my balance and tumbled from the apple tree branch to land with a muffled thump on the damp, fruit-littered grass.

Neve turned to look at me.

I felt hot and dared not meet her stare. My embarrassment coiled with frustration. She should be the shamed one, not me. I was her stepmother, after all...

But I had not watched with the eyes of a parent.

I had never before witnessed any human act so lovely.

"Go, Mariah," Neve spoke softly, and Mariah ran, red-faced, a fist pressed to her mouth, kicking up browned apples with her little black boots.

Neve stared at me, eyes like burning emeralds, as she leaned upon the same knobby tree she had pressed Mariah against. Her fingers absently replaced the front of her raven-black bodice, pulled tight and drew a bow.

I wanted to speak, but I found I could not command my tongue.

So she sighed and crossed her arms at her waist. "Will you tell?"

They were the first words she had given me in weeks.

I winced.

"No."

She raised a black brow, moved near to my jumble of muddied skirts and bruised apples, and offered me her hand.

We'd never touched before. I studied her fingers. She had colored the long, sharp nails black.

She shook them, waiting. "Did you injure yourself in the fall? Are you in pain?"

I opened my mouth, but before I could respond, Neve bent down and grabbed my arm, securely but gently, and hefted my twisted body to its feet.

"Thank you, Neve. I'm fine." I busied my trembling hands with smoothing out wrinkled fabric and straightening my sleeves, pinning up my loosened hair.

She did not back away. She stood so near that her perfume mingled in my nostrils with the scent of earth and crushed apples: something dark and red, like anger, or grief. Her mouth slanted to one side, as if she were working out a stubborn thought.

I attempted a smile, to weak effect. "I'll go in now. I think—oh!"

My right ankle had the audacity to give way beneath me. In stumbling, I caught hold of Neve's hand, and she held me up, steadying my shaking with her free arm.

"You are hurt," she said, and it sounded like an accusation.

"It's nothing. It was so stupid of me to climb into that tree, knowing my own clumsiness—"

"No, it's my fault entirely. I must apologize."

"Apologize?" I couldn't hide my surprise. This was the longest conversation Neve and I had ever shared, and my assumptions about her were beginning to dissolve. She was intimidating and prideful like her father, yes, but there was a softness to her manner, her voice, that wrenched at my heart. How had it been for her, all these years, growing up under the roof of that cold, unfeeling man? Perhaps things had been better when her mother was alive.

I dared not ask about her mother, though. We were hardly on such intimate terms. I half-doubted that Neve even knew my first name. She always dined alone.

Again, my wavering smile, a shake of my head. "I feel we were both caught in compromising predicaments, and neither to blame. A short rest, and I'm certain my ankle will be fully functional again."

Neve's eyes glittered and bore through me. "You're different from the others."

"The others? Who do you—"

"Come, take my arm. I'll walk you to the house, and then you shall join me in my chamber."

"Your chamber? But I would rather—"

"Please." Neve threaded her hand beneath my elbow. For a moment, she lowered her brilliant gaze, and my eyes roved her face unattended, roaming the slope of her small nose, the subtle curves of her blood-red mouth. "I believe," she intoned quietly, still looking at the grass beneath our feet, "that I know a—treatment for a wounded ankle, and I should like to apply it, if you are willing."

Curiosity, and something unnamed, swept away my misgivings. “Yes...” I cleared my tightened throat. “Yes, I am willing.” Neve smiled, and it warmed me like a winter’s fire.

*

When I first moved into my husband’s home—“castle” described it more accurately, as it was large, turreted and constructed of old brown stone—I felt stifled by the gloom, the cavernous dark. Whispers echoed, and a chill crept the hallways, seeped beneath the doors, and no fire could persuade it to abandon its parasitic attachment to my bones. I became accustomed to shivering.

I made vain attempts at brightening the bedchamber Lexander and I shared, but the windows were grimy and narrow, and far too high for me to reach. I covered the bed with white pillows, placed my small collection of flowered hats on the mantle, scrubbed the floors and walls until my knuckles bled.

Still, the space offered little more comfort than a tomb, and I preferred the sweet, earthy solace of the orchard.

I had not thought it possible, but Neve’s room proved to be gloomier than my own. For a moment upon passing through the wide, stone-scraping doors, I blinked and rubbed at my eyes, blinded by the dark.

Vague forms gradually took shape as Neve led me across the floor, her arm still tucked in mine. The fire had nearly gone out, but the remaining embers offered an eerie, flickering illumination. Neve’s bed was large, canopied with heavy red silk, and dreary, sagging curtains obscured her windows. The far wall was occupied by rows upon rows of books on laddered shelves. I had never seen so many books, not even in my father’s study, though his had been mere decoration.

“Have you read all of those?” I asked the question without thinking, and my heart skipped a beat, startled by the loudness of my voice in the hush that had fallen between us.

Neve inclined her head, guiding me nearer to her library wall. “Many times.” Her eyes skipped over the titles, searching for something. “They are my closest friends.” With her free hand, she traced the creased spine of a thick, green leather volume, slowly slipped it off of the shelf and held it up to me.

The title was worn; its gold leaf had flecked off. But the words were still legible, and they made my insides quake: BOOK OF SHADOWS.

Neve seated me on a black tufted couch and positioned herself casually beside me, riffling through the pages, tipping her finger with her pink tongue when the yellowed papers clung together.

The book was handwritten in tea-colored ink, and here and there the words were faded, water-damaged, lost. An unfamiliar urging woke within me, and, wide-eyed, I stared across Neve's lap at the strange collection of letters, some of which seemed—beneath my light-starved gaze—to glow.

“Incantation for staving off nightmares.”

“A rain summoning.”

“Spell to see the unseen.”

A knot formed in my throat, and I swallowed hard. This was... Could Neve be—

“I'm a witch. Of a sort,” she told me, in answer to my unasked question. Her eyes remained on the book as she flipped past concoctions to vanish blemishes and remedies for swollen feet. “Does that trouble you?”

“I...” I stared at the page—entitled “To mend a twisted ankle.” Neve's black fingernails tapped restlessly upon it.

She snagged me in a piercing look, defensive and vulnerable all at once.

“Neve,” I said, savoring the cool taste of her name. “I've never known a witch. I've only heard stories.”

“Stories,” she scoffed. “Fairy stories of witches who bake children in ovens. Or curse babies. Or lock beautiful girls away in doorless towers.”

“Yes. My governess always tormented me with tales of trolls and ghouls and wicked wi—” I bowed my head. “I've heard so many strange tales of Avella. I longed to come here, you know, when I was a little girl, to find out if any of it was real. If witches were real.”

Something in my voice amused her, because she laughed—a light laugh that seemed to brighten the murk in which we sat together.

“Well, Catalina, allow me to introduce you to the secret world of *real* witches.” Brow raised, she tossed me a crooked smile. “That is, if you are still willing to submit yourself to my *wicked* intentions.”

My cheeks flamed, and I scarcely knew how to respond. First, my name—Neve had spoken my name, and the thrill of that sound crested through me, from my head to my feet, like breaking water.

“Well?”

“I—of course. I...I’m not afraid of...witchery. It’s another form of alchemy, most likely, as yet undiscovered by—”

And Neve placed a finger to my lips. “Shh.”

A long, weighted moment later, she drew her hand away, with a silencing look in those glimmering, glistening, forested eyes, and moved her mouth so near to mine that we breathed in and out the same smoky air.

“I prefer to call it magic.”

Magic.

I licked my lips.

In that instant, I forgot I was her father’s wife. I forgot the tests beneath the castle, the apples. I forgot my despair.

I forgot Mariah.

But Neve stood, laid the book flat beside me to save her place, and walked over to a tall dark cabinet at the side of her bed. Behind the glass doors was an array of colorful powders, dried herbs, amber liquids in stoppered bottles.

The doors gave way with a weighted groan, and Neve’s black-nailed fingertips danced over the corks, as if searching by touch rather than sight. Slowly, she reached toward the back of a shelf and removed from it a round-bottomed vessel of glass. She held it out to me.

I hesitated.

“Place it there, upon the altar.” Neve gestured with her chin to a little alcove beside the couch that I had not noticed. I looked back at her, and her eyes held mine fast as corset strings. Her lips parted just enough for me to glimpse the tips of her sharp white teeth, a hint of her pink tongue. I swallowed.

Gingerly, I took the bottle from her hand and, twisting to my left, placed it upon a wide, rough-hewn stand there, too tall for a table. I craned my neck, and on the altar’s surface, I observed a long bit of smoothed wood carved all over with symbols, like a wizard’s wand; a little marble bowl with a pestle; a purple stone so dark and deep that the firelight could not penetrate it; and a knife. A small knife with a bone handle. Compelled by curiosity, I reached up and grazed my thumb against its tip: sharp. Sharp enough to pierce. A bead of blood pooled at the place where the blade had met my skin.

I stared at that blood for a long while, as if I hoped to see a vision within it. But I was no fortuneteller. I knew no magic. In that moment, I knew only fear.

It had been there all along, I'm certain, my fear, sleeping, perhaps. But the knife had woken it up, and I sat frozen.

"Catalina?"

I felt Neve before me, cold and looming as a wall of winter, and I fought the urge to run—or, rather, to hobble to my feet and limp away. I had nowhere to go, save my own lonely, shadowed room, or the orchard. But were I lying on my bed or on the branch of an apple tree, my thoughts would be full of Neve, I knew. Only Neve. Truly, I had no choice but to stay and face her, and that knife, and my fear.

She knelt, a dark knight in black silk garments, and took my hand, smeared my blood on her palms. "You're crying. Have I frightened you?"

I pulled my hand back and touched my face. "No. No. I think I frightened—I *frighten* myself."

"Good!" She arched her neck back—it gleamed white as lily-of-the-valley—and winked one fey eye at me. "I frighten myself, too. Often. It's the best habit to have. If you aren't scared, Catalina, you are stagnant." She leaned toward me and took my hand again, and she exhaled rather than spoke, "Fear reminds you that you're alive. Like this—" She traced a circle around my pinpoint finger wound. "A reminder...to live *now*."

I held her hard, soft gaze.

Her eyes flicked to my lips; they parted for her.

And then, with a rustle of skirts and creak of boots, she was gone, drawn back to her cabinet.

I pressed my fingers to my mouth.

I had never desired. Not physically. It was not in my nature. I had thought.

Until the orchard and Neve.

I swallowed, shifted, bit my tongue. The room felt too small, Neve too close. My heart was wild, a loosed, feral thing. I closed my eyes and tamed it with thoughts like whips.

"Come, Catalina."

Neve was before me again. She gave me her arm, and—mechanically, like the automaton I saw with my last governess at the village fair—I took

it, stood. She was just an inch or two taller than me, but I felt like an infant beside her: new to the world, legless, without words.

"I don't know what to do," I whispered, and then tilted on my good ankle; I hadn't meant to speak aloud.

But Neve held me fast and crafted me a smile.

I cracked, crumbled. "Neve, perhaps I should just—"

"You should just do as I say," she cut me off simply, "and trust the magic bits to the witch." She led me to the bed and turned me round to face her. "Now, Catalina..." Cool hands on my shoulders. "Do you trust me?"

I blinked, surprised out of my anxiety. "I have never trusted anyone in my life."

Her eyes widened. "And how many people have you known?"

"Very few," I admitted, breaking away from her gaze. "And none well. And...I am certain none have known me."

"Not even my father?"

Something snapped inside of my chest. I thought I would fall, but my bones were too rigid, my teeth clenched tight as my fists at my sides, and Neve held me still, slipping her hands down from my shoulders to pinch at my waist, rest against my hips. Their weight there calmed me, felt oddly familiar. And I thought...how lovely, to be held.

Neve was speaking my name, repeating it, and I watched her mouth, only her mouth, but as if from a distance, secretly, as if I were still hidden in my tree and she were still kissing Mariah, her mouth imprinting red hearts on the other girl's skin—

"Catalina, can you hear me?"

"I hear you." I leaned backward, reached for the bed behind me, seated myself on its edge. My skirt billowed over my lap for a moment, caught in the gust of my movement. I looked up at Neve and sighed.

She made as if to reach for my hands but then seemed to change her mind, let her fingers catch at her bodice stays. "Have I upset you in some way?"

"In some way, yes." The words passed my lips before I could bite them back, and so I let them go, shrugged my shoulders. I felt raw but reckless. "I'd prefer not to speak of your father."

"Ever?"

I ventured a small smile. "You're assuming we'll speak again after this encounter."

"True." Neve's green eyes glittered like something small but precious. "I suppose our history might suggest otherwise. I have meant to—Well..." She inclined her swan neck toward me, her face drawn, serious. "I have learned to keep my distance when it comes to...stepmothers." She paused, tilted her head, gazing at me. "You always look so sad, Catalina. I've watched you—"

"I've seen you watching me."

A soft laugh. "Perhaps I'm not so sly as I like to imagine myself."

My gaze fell from her teasing eyes to her parted lips, her fine chin, her throat—flushed now the softest shade of apricot. "No, you're quite sly."

The apricot deepened to a rosy pink. I shook my head in private astonishment. Perhaps the spell was cast already: I felt bewitched.

Silent, Neve knelt at my feet, and I noticed the marble bowl was now in the palm of her left hand; in her right, she held an uncorked bottle. A deep orange liquid sloshed within it. She tipped the bottle at the bowl's rim, and the fragrant oil spilled out, sweet-smelling as flowers. I breathed it in.

"Jasmine," Neve whispered, stoppering the bottle and placing it on the stone floor, beside her booted feet. "And this—" She took up a long vial full of small green leaves, sprinkled the dried bits into the bowl like a cook adding spice to the pot. "—is comfrey. For healing...and, incidentally, luck."

"I wouldn't mind a little of that," I said with a fleeting smile. My heart beat so fast within me—how shocking, the turns of this day! After a lifetime of nothing worth mentioning, to be here, now...

Neve's hands worked slowly, hypnotically, but she said nothing more. She seemed lost in concentration, utterly focused on her task. She added another oil—a pungent one, but clear as water—and a few more herbs, none of which I recognized. Then she drew from her skirt pocket a handful of tiny crystals; their green matched her shining eyes. The stones fell from her palm into the bowl soundlessly.

"Is it finished?" I asked her, startled by the eagerness in my voice.

Neve's mouth curved upward at the corner nearest me, but she shook her head, a sharp, sure movement. "Patience," she admonished, and I leaned forward. She waved her pestle before my nose. "I'm creating a salve and must grind the herbs and stones finely."

"Have you done this many times before?"

“This spell, in particular?” She bent her head over the bowl, pressing the pestle hard against the crystals. “I’ve not had cause to try this spell before today.”

“But other spells,” I urged her to go on, because I found I loved the sound of her voice, loved watching her mouth form unexpected words. “You have done other spells. What for?”

She paused to offer me an arch look. “Such curiosity. Are you no longer worried about my being a wicked witch?”

I swallowed, glanced at my hands in my lap. “In perfect honesty, I am fond of the notion that there might be more to this world than—” I gestured helplessly. “—waking and eating and sleeping and—”

“And husbands.” Neve’s eyes flicked at me meaningfully, and I nodded my head. “There is more, Catalina. So much more. I would like to...” But her shoulders tensed, and she ground more urgently at the marble bowl.

We sat unspeaking for such a long time that her voice startled me when she stated, quite forcefully, “I shall never have a husband.”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “But won’t—*he* force you to marry? To secure his fortune to an heir?”

“Is that what your parents did? Did they force you?”

“No.” I felt shame hot as coals. “They didn’t have to. I was lonely. I thought— I was...stupid. I didn’t know what it meant to marry. I didn’t know anything.”

“Sheltered like a prized rose.” Neve smiled sadly. “I know the story, and the ending is always the same. But it doesn’t have to be. It won’t be, not for me. But then, my story is already rather odd.” Her smile wavered.

I ducked my head, exhaled a breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding. “I’m glad for you, Neve. I wish I had been wise enough...and strong enough to seek another way.”

The pestle fell onto the stones with a clatter as Neve rose to clasp my hands tightly in hers. “Your story isn’t over,” she insisted, so near that I felt her breath warm my face. “You can be...the first. And the *last*.”

“What do you mean? The first—”

“You aren’t his—my father’s—first wife, Catalina. Or his second. Or third.”

“Of course he’s married before. He had you—”

“No.” She lowered herself to the floor again, raked black-nailed fingers through her black hair. “You don’t understand. He’s... He’s different than you think. Well, who do you imagine taught me spellwork? Certainly not a governess.”

“You mean, he...”

Neve nodded her head.

“He’s a—”

“A witch. A different sort of witch than I became, or was meant to become, perhaps, but a witch nonetheless.”

I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat and glimpsed the bruises on my wrists from Lexander's tests. “He’s...cruel and uncaring. I think he's *mad*.” The words tasted forbidden, like poison on my tongue.

“Ambition makes monsters of men,” Neve whispered. She looked up at me; her eyes gleamed. “I want to help you.” She bit her red lips. “I never helped the others because... Oh, I must think on this.”

I watched, bewildered, as Neve set back at her task, fetching a pale cloth from a drawer in her cabinet and dipping it into the bowl. When the cloth was covered in the salve, she peered at me through her thick lashes. “May I have your ankle?”

I nodded, and in silence, Neve took my boot in her palm and began to slowly unfasten the tiny buttons. She was steady, so sure. I envied her that. My own limbs shook with coiled nerves, and my breathing grew shallow.

When the boot was off, Neve’s hands slid up my calf, beneath my chemise, reaching for the fastenings on my garter. “Neve...”

“Mm?” Her nails found bare skin, lingered there an intolerable moment.

“Are you and Mariah...I mean, do you—”

“Are we lovers?” The garter snapped loose. Neve began to unroll my stocking with her careful hands, her skin brushing against my own. “No. We are not. It was only a game. Why do you ask, Catalina?” Her eyes regarded me, knowing and heavy-lidded.

How I longed to kiss her.

And all at once, I remembered myself, my role, my lot. Abashed at my behavior—and more so at my thoughts—I straightened my skirt across my lap, cleared my throat. I bent over to unroll the stocking myself, kicking it off of the tips of my toes. “Perhaps I should apply the salve. Or must it be

administered by a...a witch?" Infuriatingly, my voice shook, and I turned my face away.

"You may do it," Neve replied softly, "if you'd like."

"Show me."

"Come down here, beside me." She looked so young from this angle, her eyes wide as moons. I took her hand and lowered myself to the floor, lifting my skirt away from my twisted ankle. Neve placed the saturated cloth in my palm. "Wrap it all the way around—like this," she said, and she guided me, pressing her fingers against the back of my hand, until we both encircled my ankle together. The cloth felt slippery against my skin. Our eyes met, and I wondered how I had passed so many days, so many nights, in this tomb without seeking out Neve's company. I mourned for all of the time lost. Mourned, at the same time, for myself, for wishing for things that could never be.

"This sadness," she murmured, shaking her head so that her hair shone blue in the firelight. "It's a disservice to your beauty." She removed her hand from my leg to place it against my cheek. "He doesn't deserve to look upon such a face."

"Beauty," I scoffed softly, blinking back tears. "I chose my fate. I'm weak to pity myself for it."

"Then choose to be strong. Choose to be brave."

Bravery was an alien notion, applied to myself. I tilted my head, mystified. "I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Well." Neve offered me a layered smile. "Start tonight by casting your first magic spell."

"What—"

"Shh. Just read with me." She held my gaze until I swallowed, took a shuddering breath and nodded. Her book lay open beside her, and she traced a black fingernail over a set of inked lines. I pressed the cloth hard against my ankle until I felt the ache there: something familiar to focus on. It seemed as if I stood on a precipice, and a breath—my next breath—would tip me over the edge.

I was less afraid of falling than of hovering in mid-air, stuck like a fly in a spider's web.

Neve held up her hands, closed her eyes, said, "We hail you, spirits of the four corners, and we beckon you to join us in this sacred space. Please encircle us with your blessing."

The wall torches flickered, casting sharp shadows over the planes of Neve's face. She placed her book on the bed beside me and inclined her dark head. "Read, Catalina."

My heart hammered as I peered down at the page in the half-light. Irrationally, I wondered what my mother would think if she saw me now, but, in truth, my mother had always thought very little on me, and of me. Everyone had always thought very little of me.

Choose to be brave.

I licked my lips and coughed; my mouth was so dry. The letters seemed to move beneath my gaze, tumble over each other, like unruly children. I narrowed my eyes at them, pretending at sternness, and their lines smoothed, joined together to spell out words:

"This," I read aloud, in halting syllables, "is my need. My soul beseeches you, Powers, to loosen my twisted limb, to make me whole again that I may know a richness of spirit through the contentment of unbroken health. Infuse me; serve me as I...as I serve you. Neve—"

"Go on, go on," she whispered, brushing her hand over the page, over my hand on the page. "You've nearly finished. It's nearly done."

I grasped her fingers hard, shook my head. "But this won't work. I'm not a witch."

A laugh, quick and bright as lightning. "You are what you believe you are, Catalina."

"And what if I believe myself to be no one, nothing?"

"But you don't believe that, not truly. You wouldn't be here, with me, if you did." She lay her other hand on top of mine and buried her eyes somewhere deep within me. "You long for something. A 'no one' doesn't long. A 'nothing' wants for nothing. But you—you want. Don't you?"

"Yes," I breathed, and I felt like weeping. "I want so many things."

Neve lowered her chin but kept her eyes fastened to mine. "Let that want fill you. Let it fill you with determination—and power. Power is magic, and magic is power, and you have both within you." She turned away, pursed her lips together. "It's why I watch you. I can see it all around you, the magic." A pause. "It's what sets you apart from...from the others."

I stared down at her incredulously. "There is nothing...*magical* within me—"

"Trust the magic, Catalina."

There was an urgency in Neve's voice, and I could not absorb her words, but the spell wavered unfinished in the ether—I felt it like a ghost drifting through me, back and forth—so I bowed my head over the book and inhaled a hot breath. “Shall I continue?”

“Do.”

I blinked at the page to focus my tired eyes. Exhaustion had replaced my fear, and I found myself longing to fall back on Neve's pillows.

I read: “Serve me as I serve you. For we are one, and together we are all. Body and spirit mend that I may walk upright over the path of my destiny.”

Destiny. I had never paired such a noble word with myself. I nearly laughed, but the room felt too somber for laughter.

“Now, away, spirits, with our humble thanks,” Neve spoke softly, releasing my hands.

Startled, I blinked down at the page for a moment, rereading the lines, and then flipped to the following page—a spell for banishing pantry moths. “That's it?”

“Yes. The spell is cast. What more were you expecting?”

“Something...a bit more dramatic, I suppose.” Sheepish, I shut the book on my lap and traced a finger over the title on its cover. I felt Neve's eyes on me and both cherished and flinched from their attention.

“It was a simple spell, true enough,” she said with a smile in her voice. I looked at her, allowed myself to look at her without abashment, and marveled at the shadows of deep dark forest in her bright eyes. “Simple domestic witchery. It's a fine starting point. Another time—if you'll permit me—I shall cast you a gaudy spell.”

“Gaudy magic?” I smiled despite myself.

She grinned. “Yes. We might even dress for the part. I own some very dramatic gowns. I should love to see you in something shining and green...” Neve's lips parted for a moment, as if she were about to say something more, but then she bowed her head and began to gather up her bowl and vials, placing them on the altar behind her.

“How does your ankle feel now?” she asked, gently removing the cloth from my leg and folding it into quarters in her lap. “Would you like to try walking?”

“I suppose I must,” I said, and Neve rose to wrap an arm around my waist and guide my arm about her shoulders.

“Lean on me, Catalina. I’m stronger than I look.”

Gingerly, I tested my twisted ankle by placing my full weight upon it. Instead of the expected twang of pain, I felt a blissful nothing and laughed in surprise. “It worked! Neve, the magic worked! Oh, thank you!”

She turned her face toward mine, still gripping me at my middle, and arched a tapered brow. “Thank yourself. The magic was yours.”

*

The morning air bit. I welcomed it. My boots sank deep with every step, and the wet earth sucked at my heels. Save for the orchard and the forest, the castle grounds were fallow, a marshland thick with cattails and angry geese. I thought the geese beautiful, broad-winged, snowy white.

A small group of goslings floated upon a pond to my right, kicking their little webbed feet behind them. I dug in my pocket for the fat loaf I’d swiped from the kitchen on my way out this morning and tore off some pieces, tossed them into the slimy water, laughed aloud at the birds’ splashing pursuits of the soggy bread, at the simple joy they took in swallowing it down.

I tugged on my sleeves, holding my elbows close to my body. My arms ached from the trials Lexander had subjected me to the previous night, a series of seemingly random needle pricks, tests of pain tolerance. At one point, he pressed a thick white cloth to my mouth, and I fainted right away. When I woke, I felt so ill, I vomited upon the floor.

Then I watched in mute loathing as he scribbled notes upon his ledger before finally declaring the horrid proceedings done for the night.

Watching the geese now, I could not stomp down a pang of envy: for their freedom. For their glorious wings. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine how it must feel to have admittance to a boundless sky.

Not for the first time, I plotted wild plans of escape: I would steal a maid’s uniform and run on foot to the village... I would steal a horse and ride until we were a country away, until we were both—human and horse—exhausted... I would use one of Neve’s spells upon my mirror, magic it, step right through it, into another place.

When I raised my eyes, I saw a dark figure emerging from the forest far beyond.

Neve. I recognized her confident stride. She always let her arms swing loose and free, always held her chin up, as if daring the world to challenge her.

She waved a hand, and I waved back, waiting.

It had been nearly a fortnight since our encounter in the orchard, and every day since, we had met as if by fate; our paths had so rarely crossed before. Sometimes, I must admit, I sought her out. One glance into her jeweled eyes never failed to remind me that there was beauty yet, that life had its joys as well as its sorrows.

But above all else, Neve made me feel dangerous. She made me wonder what I might do if I were simply given the proper instruments, or the motivation.

“Dreary morning for a stroll.”

I shoved a curl of damp hair from my cheek. “It suits me,” I told Neve with a grim smile.

I was weary from the trials in the laboratory last night, but there was a sleepy part of me that thrilled at Neve’s nearness. I felt more awake just being close to her.

Suddenly, the sky rumbled, and I glanced up at the heavy grey clouds.

Neve inclined her head toward me, a smile playing over her red lips as she fell in step. “You may not know this about me, Catalina, but I’m averse to sunshine. Give me a wet, foggy walk any day over a romp through a flowerbed.”

I shook my head. “You do seem drawn to mysterious things.”

“Like magic, you mean?” She scuffed her boot against a stone. “Or like...you?”

I nearly tripped. Then I laughed. “I think you’ve confused me with someone else.”

“No, I haven’t. You’re just confused about who you are.”

I stopped, facing her with open astonishment. “I know who I am. If nothing else, I know that.”

“Tell me, then. What do you see when you look in your mirror?”

“I see...” I swallowed, dry-mouthed, thinking of the large mirror on my dressing table, the wedding—and farewell—gift from my mother. Gold-gilt and carved all over with roses. In my loneliness, it had become a friend of sorts. I spoke into it as if I were talking to my mother and father, told them of my pains and my little pleasures (the geese, the magic, the wonder

of Neve's smile), and then I closed my eyes and imagined them answering back in words they would never give me, had never given me: We love you, Catalina. We're proud of you. You're an honor to our family.

It was a foolish game, a baby's game. Still, I cherished that mirror, and I knew intimately the girl whose reflection filled it.

"I see sad eyes, and my father's straight nose, and a mouth...closed tight."

"Shall I tell you what I see?" Neve asked, taking my bare, childish hands into her gloved fingers.

I bowed my head, feeling anxious. "I suppose."

She laid one finger against my temple. "I see eyes that have seen much sadness but are not sad, only dimmed for lack of colorful things to rest upon."

My gaze lingered over her green eyes, her red mouth, the blue sheen of her impossibly black hair.

"I see a nose," she said, tapping the tip of my nose, "that is a bit haughty, actually. Sure of itself. A queen's nose, I'd say."

I scoffed, but Neve hushed me with a look. "And your mouth," she went on, licking her own lips as she examined mine, "teases. It's subtle, offers little besides a flash of teeth or glimpse of soft tongue, but there are stories trapped within you, aching to be spoken aloud." Her finger grazed my lower lip, and I moved backward involuntarily. I felt too warm, flushed, and began walking again, gasping at the cool air.

*

All was black, save for the dim speckling of moonlight on the floor just behind the chamber door. A full moon, it had to be, to penetrate that filthy window. Seated on the bed in my corset and chemise, my thin hair loose and tangled around my shoulders, I stared at the light for a long while, and I kept my mind carefully empty.

I had forgotten how to sleep months ago. It used to seem such a simple thing, to close my eyes and slip into dreaming. Now, when I closed my eyes, I saw red where there should be black, and my heart skittered, as restless as a hare.

Tonight, after our apple communion, Lexander—in a foul, silent temper—had trudged straight down to his laboratory. I had watched him

fling back the heavy door beside my wardrobe and descend the stone stairs, a bottle of cider wine tucked beneath his arm.

I hated nights like these.

Sometimes he fell into a drunken sleep in the bowels of his lab, but sometimes he shook it off, came back for me...

I knew the sounds: first came the shuffling of his stockinged feet on the stones.

There.

Then the brush of his robes against the wall—

There.

—and I hoped now, as I always cruelly, desperately hoped, that his sleeve might catch on the torch flame or his feet trip on the uneven steps. But his hand was at the door handle, hurling the door open so that it cracked against the wardrobe, and his silhouette, bright with moonlight and firelight, trudged forward.

"We must finish this now," he growled, holding his torch high above his head. The flames cast maddening shadows, deepening the wrinkles of his forehead, distorting the length of his slack jaw.

"More tests?" Numbly, I sat up, let the coverlet fall to my waist, and I looked at him, truly looked at him for the first time in weeks, perhaps months.

I saw no glimpses of Neve in his face. Possibly it was once a handsome face, drawn out as it was in bold, classic lines. His eyes were black, and his hair was white as wax—startlingly so. He raked a hand through it now as he leered down at me.

"Come!"

My bare toes curled upon the cold floor, and he took my arm, pulled me close so that I smelled the sick on his clothing.

"That's a proper wife," he hissed into my ear. I smelled his breath, tart as sour apples, and clenched my fists.

"How long has it been since you arrived?" he asked me, glaring down. His eyes were wild, bouncing back and forth from my face to his bedside table, upon which rested his peeling knife.

"I don't know. There are no instruments for timekeeping here. Not even a clock." I moved away from him, pressed my body against the front of my wardrobe.

"I think," he said, tapping his stubbled chin with a finger, "that it has been quite long enough. I've waited—oh, Catalina. You can't imagine how I've waited."

"You're speaking nonsense."

He leered over me. "I am. And the nonsense must end."

"Lexander..." I edged nearer to the open door that led out to the hallway. My heart felt as if it were pounding in my throat. "I'm exhausted. I must sleep—"

"Silence." He tore his eyes away and stared pointedly at the torches in the wall. They sputtered, went out. I watched in horror as the lights in the hallway, too, winked out one by one. By moonlight, I saw Lexander lunge for his knife.

"No..." I ran for the doorway but stumbled over my chemise and felt myself flying through the air.

"Catalina?"

I gasped as I collided with Neve. She held us both up, encircled my waist smoothly with her arm. I blinked at her, unseeing. Never before had she entered our bedchamber, and she had certainly never disturbed her father at night...

"Neve!" Lexander exclaimed, his face suddenly drained of all color. "How did you—"

"Oh. Have I interrupted something?" Neve asked with uncharacteristic sweetness, though I was surprised to notice that her voice shook a bit. "My apologies. I only wanted to wish you pleasant dreams. Since you are so often plagued with nightmares, Father, I made you a charm for dreaming." She held up something in her hand, a small bag. I could scarcely make it out in the darkness. "Catch."

She tossed the object at her father, but he made no move to snatch it from the air. It landed upon the stones with a dull thud.

"How thoughtful of you, my dear *witch*." Ice dripped from his words.

"Well..." Neve held me tighter, easing backward from the room in small, silent steps. "You taught me all I know."

Lexander laughed bitterly. "No. Not all."

I watched Neve's free hand arc through the air, a pale, fingered shadow, and, in an instant, the torches burst forth with eerie green flames. I trembled and glanced longingly over my shoulder, desperate to flee, but Neve held me fast.

"I'll escort my stepmother to *my* bedchamber now," she told her father in cold, enunciated syllables. "And leave you to your dreams. You'll sleep better alone."

Lexander stood still, hands loose at his sides, a doomed expression on his face. He looked shrunken beneath the green-hued light, small: a chastised child in a vomit-stained nightshirt. "You have broken the pact, Neve."

"I know," she whispered. "I should have broken it long ago."

We turned around and left him.

*

"He meant to kill me."

"Yes. And no." Neve waved her hand over the candle on her altar, and the wick ignited, green as the fires she had enflamed, as if by a thought, all along the corridors. I felt brittle as May ice, and I braced myself for cracking.

"He had a knife. He was going to—"

"He's grown desperate. He's running out of ideas."

"Ideas for what?"

"Sit down, Catalina. You're shaking." Neve's eyes caught me like vines. She took hold of my wrists and, face to face, led me toward her red-canopied bed. She lifted me at the waist, surprising me with her strength, and seated me upon the silk coverlet. "Take deep breaths. In and out, in and out..."

I followed her lead and inhaled deeply. When I let the air out, I shuddered, and I was shamed to feel tears spilling from the corners of my eyes. I tried to blink them away, but there was no end to them, and Neve tugged a bit of soft lace from her dress pocket and pressed it to my cheeks.

"Thank you," I whispered, taking the lace from her and crumpling it tight in my hand. "What was in the little charm you tossed at him?"

"A sleeping charm, as I said. Though he will sleep far longer than usual, perhaps through tomorrow."

Relief washed over me. With Lexander asleep, we were safe—for now. I willed my agitated mind to relax. "What did he mean, Neve, about the pact?"

"Shh." She kneeled down. Her face shone moon bright before me. My hand moved of its own accord, reached out to rest upon her black hair. She seemed, in my trembling haze, a fairy creature stepped out of a story, come to fly me away. Had she sprouted wings in that moment, I wouldn't have startled. I half-believed, as I squinted down at her now, that I saw twin shapes ghosting from her shoulder blades, thin-veined, ephemeral things, like fern leaves...

"You must rest." With decisive movement, Neve climbed onto the bed beside me and then moved to my back. I felt her fingers tug at my stays, and I stiffened reflexively; my skin tingled, hot. No one had ever dressed or undressed me save for my maidservants and—more often lately—myself.

"We should call my maid—"

"And set the kitchens afire with gossip all night?" Neve laughed softly near my ear. Her voice was low when she bent her head toward my shoulder and said, "I've done my fair share of unlacings. You're in practiced hands."

My heartbeat quickened, seemingly determined to burst through the corset's boning. After a moment, I nodded, swallowed and closed my eyes. "Thank you."

"It's nothing."

"No, I mean... You came... You stopped him—"

"As I said, it was nothing. Or, rather, it was long overdue." I felt Neve's knuckles press lightly into my back as she drew the tight cord from its grommets. "You...you don't know me. I'm afraid you wouldn't like me a bit if you did."

"Well," I sighed, suddenly exhausted, "you have been kind to me, and I am grateful to have one friend here."

Neve's hands stilled. "Are we friends, then?"

"I would like to think so."

"And is that what you long for most? A friend?"

No, my heart whispered, and I was too overwhelmed, too tired, too confused to stop my tongue from speaking the essential truth it had held for all my life: "I long for love."

I felt the cord slip free, and the corset fell forward; I pressed my hands against my chest to hold the corset in place over my thin chemise. Neve edged around to sit beside me, twirling the cord over her fingers.

When she looked up, her eyes were different somehow, shadowed, and she held the corner of her bottom lip between her pointed teeth.

"We're more alike than I imagined," she said, her voice thick. "But I'm afraid it's too late now." Her green gaze searched mine so deeply, I felt it like fingertips upon my heart. "In another world, maybe..." She shook her head. "I never expected to linger so long, to be honest. But I became... addicted. Life is a magic all its own."

"Neve, what—"

She waved a hand dismissively. "Never mind. I'm a melancholy fool, and I've no right to mourn. All that matters now is..." She sighed. "You must know the truth, all of it, before I leave you."

"Leave me? Where are you going?" To my knowledge, Neve had not gone on any outings in all the time I'd spent as Lexander's wife. No one seemed to leave the castle grounds, save for the servants on rare trips to the village for supplies or visits with family. A small knot of panic rose within me at the thought of Neve going away, of my returning to a solitary existence, a life without her.

And then, with a sinking dread, I realized that I couldn't remain here a day longer myself. Lexander had severed all moral ties.

Neve cocked her dark head to the side and smiled kindly, but even that gesture failed to mask the sadness in her eyes. "I must return...to my home. Where I belong. And, after all, I do miss it... Terribly." She sighed, shook her head. "But first, you and I shall undertake an excursion. Tomorrow, at first light."

"Tomorrow." I blinked at her, trying to make sense of her words. "But Lexander—"

"*Lexander*," she snarled, "has no say in the matter. He never has."

Despite Neve's confidence, fear gripped me. "What if the charm doesn't work? What if he comes for me in the night? For us? What if he tries to—"

Neve lifted her arm and pointed a finger toward the black couch pushed against the opposite wall. With a deafening scrape, the couch slid across the floor, its wooden feet sparking against the stones, until it rested squarely in front of the closed chamber door.

"There," Neve smiled slightly, lowering her arm. She leveled me a soft gaze. "I've enchanted the locks, Catalina, so he could never open them, no matter how hard he tried, even if my dream spell were to fail. But..."

She gestured toward the couch. "A visual barricade might soothe your nerves."

I stared at her; then I realized I was staring at her and glanced away, my cheeks flushed. "Is this the gaudy magic you mentioned before?"

"Oh," she laughed, "it can get much gaudier. For example..." Her eyes trained over the canopy above our heads, and an impish smile played over her lips. "That will do."

As I watched, the heavy red silk unknotted itself from the bed posters and began to slip loose, shimmering and waving like water in the air. The fabric spread out, flat as a sheet floating above our heads. I made a little yelp as it suddenly dropped and spun itself into a tight coil, twisting around and around until it formed a perfect spiral. Spinning, spinning... It arced around us, a shining red wheel.

Neve laughed her throaty laugh. "Indulge me a moment, Catalina. I so rarely have the opportunity to show off." She flicked her slender wrist toward the fabric, and it uncoiled slowly, snakelike, winding its length around our bodies but never grazing us. I watched wide-eyed as the red silk whirled before me. It was dizzying, bizarre.

"It's beautiful," I whispered, venturing to touch the undulating ribbon with my fingertip. "I have never seen anything so beautiful."

Except for you, my heart added, and Neve looked at me so sharply, I feared that I had perhaps spoken aloud. We were cocooned together within the spiraling silk; I saw nothing but red and Neve...and I wished we could remain this way forever, the Lexanders of the world forgotten beyond.

"Catalina," Neve said, her eyes falling to the hand still clutching the corset against my chest. "No matter what happens tomorrow, I want you to know—I regret...ignoring you for so long. And I wish there was more time." Her lips parted, and she closed her eyes. "It was all arranged, you know. I knew you were in the orchard, up in that tree. I'm not proud of it, but... I took Mariah there on purpose, hoping to find you there."

"But why?"

"I'm drawn to you," she said plainly. "I have tried so many times to..." She smiled a crooked smile. "To get you to notice me." When her gaze met mine, she looked so vulnerable, my heart quivered. But I refused to look away, refused to retreat to bashfulness.

"I..." I took a deep breath, let the corset fall to my lap and, hesitant, reached for Neve's hands. "I'm drawn to you, as well," I said quickly, before

I lost the courage to speak. "I have never met anyone like you. And I've never..." I held my breath.

"Never what?" Neve prompted me with her parted red lips and flickering eyes, squeezing my hands in her own.

I shook my head. The words had frozen within me.

Her hands loosened, and she leaned back, tilting her head, her body, away. The fabric paused in the air, still as a curtain in a painting, and then it fell all around us.

I stared at the pool of red, certain my face burned just as bright. I folded and unfolded the corset in my lap anxiously. Neve stood up, gathered the red silk in her arms, and I watched her naked feet move toward her wardrobe in the corner of the room.

"Will you help me, Catalina?"

I swallowed and glanced up at her. She was standing with her back to me, peering back over her shoulder. "My corset," she explained, smiling softly. "A favor for a favor?"

Feeling clumsy and thick-fingered, I slid from the bed and moved toward her, lifted my hands to her back.

"No, no touching." Her eyes were teasing, and I felt thoroughly confused.

"What? How can I—"

"Look." Neve held out the red silk before her, spread wide across both of her arms. "When I call on the magic, I ask it to meld with me. It suffuses me, like light. It feels like light. And with my mind, I can move that light, lift it up, twist it, twirl it." The fabric began to form itself into waves, rolling like water between Neve's hands. "It takes nothing more than a thought. It *is* a thought. But thought...intensified."

I stared at the silk as if hypnotized. "It's miraculous," I whispered.

"No." Neve crumpled the fabric in her arms and tossed it to the floor. It lay in a pile, motionless. "It's natural. And it's easy. I want to teach you how to do it."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. I know you're tired...and confused, and frightened. And you have every right to be all of those things. But I haven't much time—"

"Why do you keep saying—"

"And this is important." Neve turned to face me fully; we were scarcely a hand's length apart. For a long moment, neither of us spoke.

Remnants of magic shimmered in the air between us, faintly golden, lending Neve's face an otherworldly glow. I gazed at her lips, her hair, her eyes... Eyes that would haunt me, I felt, for all of my days, were she to leave me, as she kept insisting she must.

"Call the magic."

"I don't know how."

Neve moved closer, so that our noses nearly touched. "Close your eyes."

I breathed in, shaking, and closed my eyes. "What should I say?"

"Speak only in your mind," she whispered, her breath cool on my skin. "Speak to the magic as you would to a friend. As you would...to me."

I sighed. It was nearly impossible to concentrate knowing Neve was so near; her sweet, wild, green perfume surrounded me until it was all I could breathe. But I shook my head and spoke to the magic, imagining that I was speaking to Neve, instead: *Come to me, fill me, hold me, let me hold you...*

And, to my disbelief and elation, the magic came.

But this was different than the spell we'd cast from Neve's book.

This was raw, untamed *Magic*. It had no prescribed purpose, and no vessel save for my body... And when it filled my body, I knew what it meant to be alive for the very first time.

My eyes flicked open.

I felt like lightning.

And Neve was staring at me in a new way... A way that I liked. Very much.

"I knew it," she breathed, resting her hand against my cheek. "Oh, Catalina. You're *luminous*."

Neve drew a hand mirror off of her dressing table, presented its surface before my eyes. The woman who stared back—that reflection—was barely me...but me, nonetheless. I took the mirror from Neve's hands and gaped at myself, aglow with magic...opened up with *power*.

I almost felt afraid of the face in the mirror. I was staring at a stranger.

Then Neve said over my shoulder, her chin perched beside my neck, "You're the fairest of them all, Catalina," and her lips grazed my skin for a glorious instant.

I turned to her, brimming over with light, and shook my head once. "No. You are."

She held my gaze, her mouth just faintly upturned. "I suppose we'll have to agree to disagree," she whispered, sweeping her hair over her shoulder. "Now...my corset?"

I stared at Neve's laces. The magic coursed so thick and unruly within me; I didn't know how to focus it. But I took deep breaths and calmed my mind, gazing at the constellation of freckles on the back of Neve's neck. Gradually, I felt the magic thin, like wool on a spinner's wheel, and I tested it upon the pile of silk on the floor. The red fabric responded to my steady thoughts, folded and unfolded itself quietly, softly.

"It worked," I whispered, stunned. I exhaled a shallow breath, inhaled again. "I think I'm ready."

Neve tilted her head toward me and smiled. "I trust you completely."

"Oh... Thank you." I blinked back tears and directed my gaze again to Neve's corset strings. The laces lifted at my command, and, one by one, they slipped free of the little grommets, the ends held aloft as if grasped by invisible hands.

When there was only one section of crisscrossed lacing remaining, I paused, let the magic drift and settle deep within me.

"What's wrong?" Neve asked, tossing me a concerned look.

"Nothing," I said in a low voice that sounded nothing like myself; the magic had left its mark on every part of me, it seemed.

"Then why have you stopped?"

I took several deep breaths, smiling despite my exhaustion. "I think I'm spent. In truth, I've never felt so..." My legs shuddered beneath me, and I reached backward for the bed, grabbing a handful of the coverlet. "I'm sorry, Neve. I felt so strong, and then—"

Laces trailing at her feet, Neve again helped me onto the bed, and she rested her hands on my knees, eyes bright as stars. "Do you realize what you've done tonight, Catalina?"

I laughed humorlessly. "Narrowly avoided death at the end of a knife's point?"

"Well, yes, but..." She waved her hand impatiently. "You've harnessed magic in what amounts to an instant! You bent it, wielded it, *mastered* it in a matter of minutes! I had hardly dared hope, but now—I *know* you can set them free."

"Set who free?"

Neve shook her head. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow we go to them, and..." Her forehead creased. She lowered her chin and moved her arms to her back to unlace the remaining grommets. She let the corset fall to her feet and crawled onto the mattress beside me.

I edged backward slowly, toward the pillows, anxious to lay down my pounding head. I lay on my side, and Neve mirrored me, her black-clad length inches away from me, her hand resting on my cheek.

My eyes fluttered closed; I forced them open. I was hungry for sight of her, but my body ached for sleep.

"Rest now," Neve whispered, her red mouth drawn into a small, sad smile. "Tomorrow will change everything. You must be prepared."

My lids shut against my will. Cool lips grazed my forehead, and my exhausted mind sprouted a dream forest: dark green and shimmering with wings.

*

My thoughts paced in circles.

It was a heavy grey morning, and I felt heavy and grey myself. My heart was a boulder in my chest.

I stood still upon the marsh, allowing my boots to sink in the muck up to my ankles, and I turned to Neve in panic. "I must get away from here..." I glanced back at the castle; my teeth chattered at sight of it. "I need to go to the village, speak to the authorities—"

"There's no point in that, Catalina. No one will listen to you there."

"What do you mean?" My stomach clenched, and I paled, my lips gone cold and dry.

"He pays them. All of them. The servants, the townspeople." Her jaw tightened. "For their...pretended ignorance. Their silence."

I stared at Neve for a long, weighted moment. "He bribes them?"

"Yes."

She began walking slowly, silently, beside me.

I swallowed, taking small, shuffling steps. A prickly seed of fear sprouted leaves deep within my gut. What was I to do? I couldn't stay here, not another moment, but my parents would never have me back, I knew—the social humiliation would devastate them—and they would never believe what Lexander had done, or attempted to do, to me.

My hands made fists at my sides, so tight the knuckles blanched white. “Then...” I spoke softly, glancing at Neve, “Where are we going?”

“To a house. A cottage. It’s in the forest.” She gestured to the wide expanse of tar-black woods at our backs. “It’s quite the walk. Do you feel up to it? You still look tired.”

There was a subtle warning in her tone, in the cast of her eyes. I couldn’t interpret it and was too desperate to inquire about it. I had to leave. Must leave. Now.

“That—that sounds charming, a cottage in the woods,” I stuttered, my voice barely above a whisper. I took a deep breath and sighed. “You know...I used to dream of living in a little cottage.”

Neve’s face darkened; she pulled her lavender cloak tighter. “It’s not that sort of cottage...” Her voice trailed away as she stared down at her feet. “I hate to take you to such a place, but you must see— Well... You must see the truth with your own eyes. There is no other way.”

I turned around, examined the thick, gloomy woods, and suppressed a shiver.

But then I remembered the magic, how it had made me feel—firm, unafraid, powerful—and I nodded my head.

“Take me there.” The cool wind caught up my voice, carried it far away.

*

The pines whispered over our heads, and needles rustled beneath our boots. It was so dark under and amongst the mass of trees, just light enough to make out Neve’s shape before me. She took long strides through rare slashes of sunshine, and I found myself skipping to keep pace. Her cloak billowed behind her, shadowed a dusty grey.

I had never explored these woods, had never thought to. The forest appeared foreboding even from a distance, and within it, I experienced the sensation of being followed. My head snapped at every unexpected sound, though Neve marched on determinedly, her white hands balled into fists at her sides.

I sighed and fell back a bit. “Can we rest?” I asked Neve after we had walked for a long while.

“Rest? Here?” She tossed me a bleak look over her shoulder. “Not if you value your sanity. The villagers call this the Mad Forest for a reason.”

My eyes searched the trees surrounding us with bare distrust. “Are there robbers here? Thieves?”

Neve laughed. “No. No robbers. None living, at least.”

“Oh.” I blinked, bit my lip. “Do you mean—it’s a haunted wood?”

“As full of ghosts as the sea is of salt.”

I thought about this, taking deep breaths of mossy air. “I don’t know if I believe in ghosts.”

“No? After all you have seen?” Her voice sounded odd: hollow, cold. “You will believe, Catalina. You must.”

A shudder ran through me, and a twig broke beneath my foot.

The path—if it could be called a path, as Neve seemed to be making turns at random—narrowed suddenly, and we were forced to twist sideways in order to pass through some of the crowded trunks. Here it was truly and deeply dark, and Neve reached back to grasp my hand. “So I don’t lose you,” her dim outline explained.

“How much farther?” My mouth was dry as sand. Where were we going? What was I doing? Perhaps I should have insisted Neve tell me beforehand, but I didn’t *want* to know, and it seemed, now, that I wanted to trust her—*did* trust her. And there was nothing for me back at that castle. Nothing. I had nowhere to go but forward; my past was a ruined landscape, best abandoned.

“Things work differently here—time, space,” Neve replied after a long moment, thoughtfully. “It isn’t a matter of how far we must go. It’s a matter of finding the Huntsman.”

Huntsman. At the word, my heart tumbled, and I recalled against my will a horror from my childhood: *a fresh stain of blood on the walking path, and my governess Adelaide whispering wetly in my ear, “It’s the huntsman. He slew a deer and is come to sell its flesh to Cook.” I gasped, certain he had killed one of the little fawns I was so fond of, the ones that sometimes played on our back lawn. “I won’t eat it!” I swore.*

And Adelaide grabbed my ear and dragged me wailing into the lower kitchens, where the deer was being hacked at, sawed apart, by several of the maids. I remember staring at the women, not the deer, my tongue stunned to silence. Their faces were white as snow, their hands red with blood.

With her fat fingers, Adelaide tore a bit of sinew from the deer's exposed shoulder and jabbed it at my face. The smell filled my nose, and I covered my mouth, gagging.

"Ere, Miss, a nice tasty morsel for you!"

I still remember the sound of her laughter, the maids' laughter, as I streaked from the kitchens, back out into fresh air. Later, I scattered handfuls of rose petals over the bloodstain—red on red, so I couldn't tell blood from flowers.

"A huntsman? Here, in the dark?" I asked Neve, coughing a little to conceal my discomfort.

"Yes, but you needn't be afraid, Catalina." Neve squeezed my hand gently, though I noticed that she, too, was shivering. "He may appear frightening, but he will help us. I have...met with him many times. I know his toll and am prepared to pay it."

"Pay? But—"

"Hush." I felt Neve's hand loose itself from mine, and she pressed her palm firmly against my breast to still me. "He is near. I feel him."

Horribly, an awareness swept over me: *I* felt him, too. It was not the familiar sensation of a person entering a room behind my back but more akin to the fear and certainty I felt at odd times in my bedchamber—when my restless mind was on high alert—that *something not quite mortal* was watching me, peering over my form in the darkness.

My hands quivered, desperate to cling to Neve, but I stilled them. Even in this fever pitch of fear, my pride had not left me. I closed my eyes and resigned myself to confront with dignity whomever—whatever—we had come to seek out.

"Good tidings," Neve spoke, not to me, I knew, but to *him*, and I felt the rush of his presence again, like a sinking in my stomach. My breaths came so loud, so fast; I tried to hold them in but began to feel lightheaded.

I couldn't stand it any longer, this state of feeling but not knowing: I swallowed hard and opened my eyes.

I saw nothing at first, no one—not Neve, not even the trees. But there was a strange grey light in our midst now, and as my eyes readjusted, they sought and quickly found the Huntsman, as if by animal instinct.

He had no face. No, he had a hundred faces, but none of them human. I stared helplessly, hopelessly, as his eyes transformed from feline to lupine, as his teeth grew and thickened, then rearranged themselves completely to

comprise an enormous pointed bill, a vulture's maw. This terrible face stilled, remained, its beady black eyes squinting in my direction.

Who have you brought here? the Huntsman asked, not aloud but in my head, in both of our heads, because Neve glanced toward me before answering him.

"Catalina," she said, "my latest stepmother." Her tone was full of meaning, and the Huntsman seemed to nod his avian head as he continued staring at me. "She must stop the cycle," Neve told him. "I have come to show her the truth."

You broke the pact.

"Yes. And I do not regret it."

Do you not? Your time has run out.

"One night more. I beg you."

You violated the boundaries. You chose to interfere.

"Let me pay your toll with this body, one last time, while it is still mine. It will cost you nothing to grant me this request." There was foreboding in Neve's words, and I reached for her arm, but she shrugged me off with a warning glance. "Be still, Catalina."

"But—"

"I can endure this. I have before, many times."

Endure *what*? I longed to ask her, but I didn't dare.

The toll will be double, the Huntsman said, *for you and for her.*

Neve appeared surprised by this; she blinked a few times but then straightened her shoulders. "Of course. I will pay for us both."

The Huntsman laughed. It was not a human laugh. It sounded unnatural, deranged, like mocking animals, a derisive howl. He pointed his horrid beak toward me, stared at me, through me, inside of me. I *felt* him inside of me, poking, and gasped.

"Leave her alone," Neve commanded, masking the tremor in her voice with the threat in her eyes. "I will pay your price twice over. You have no claim to her."

The Huntsman—his spirit or his ghost, I could not say *what*—uncoiled inside of my body like a snake and squeezed, bit, pinched something within my chest until I cried out, bent over with pain.

"Stop! Now!" Neve held her hands over her head, fingers crooked, as if in warning. The veins of her face and arms were illuminated, an eerie map of green.

The air crackled around us.

And then I felt him leave me. Kneeling on the forest floor, clutching my chest, I glared up into the Huntsman's shining eyes.

You are unharmed, madam, he said, but there was a wicked tilt to his feathered head. *I only took a...taste.*

"Enough." Neve stepped nearer the simpering creature; there was barely a hand's width between them. "You are in a fiendish temper, and I am in no mood for it. We'll have no more of this stupidity. Now—" She inhaled deeply. "I have made my bargain. Take your payment, gift me one single night more, and let us pass."

It happened so quickly, I might have only blinked, and yet the whole world seemed to stop, as if it were arrested in motion. I peered in wonder at the frozen sky, at the stilled leaves pointing out, stiff as starched cotton.

Then I lowered my gaze and gasped.

A black hole had opened in the space over Neve's heart.

"Neve!" I tried to scream, but no sound came out; my voice was swallowed up by a deep, even rhythm that filled my ears and every empty space within me. I wanted to reach for Neve, pull her away from this monster, but I—like the trees, like the clouds—could not move, except to close my eyes and wish it all away, as I used to do when I was a little girl. Those childish wishes never came true, and neither did this wish.

When I dared to open my eyes again, the gash in Neve's chest was bigger, blacker, and at its center pulsed the red fist of her beating heart.

I heard its beats, *felt* them as deeply as if they were my own. Indeed, my heart raced in rhythm with hers, beat for beat, a ghastly duet.

Then her heart stopped beating.

Unaccompanied, mine beat faster.

The Huntsman's horrible beak was opened wide—too wide—and his beady eyes were rolled upward, half-closed. He looked as if he were about to faint, his head was tipped back so far, but his arms spread wide at his sides, and his feet—bare human feet, with talons for toes—remained steady upon the earth.

I didn't know what was happening; panic coursed through me. I felt white and as cold as ice. I was petrified, helpless—could not feel a flutter of magic within me, could not summon the clarity to call upon it. Neve had promised that the Huntsman would aid us, but was his payment Neve's own life?

Again, I tried to cry out, to hurl my weight forward, to do anything other than blink and breathe, but I failed, and Neve's head was thrown back, just like the Huntsman's, her lips parted in a silent scream. I watched a tear slip from the corner of her closed eye.

Her heart had been still for many moments.

She was dying.

Not quite, the Huntsman's voice slithered within my mind; I shivered inwardly. *Though the price, this time, was great.*

His head fell forward with a snap of his great beak, and his arms floated down to rest against his sides. For a brief, terrible moment, he regarded me—or the statue that I had become—and then, finally, *finally*, he flicked his wrist in Neve's direction, and the black hole puckered, as if it was sewn up by a running stitch.

Neve collapsed, a doll of rags at my feet.

I fell after her, finding myself free to move again, and I drew her dark head into my lap. Her forehead was damp with perspiration, and she had no color to her. Even her red lips had blanched a ghostly shade, and a thick streak of her hair was now white—white as swan feathers. Desperate for some sign of life, I pressed my ear against her chest and nearly cried out in relief when I heard a faint, faraway throb. "Neve," I breathed.

She stirred beneath me.

"Catalina..."

I pulled back and gazed down at her face. "Are you—" The words choked in my throat. I inhaled deeply and tried again. "Are you well? I was so frightened—"

"I'm well enough." Her voice was a harsh whisper, though she winced in pain. "Now, help me rise."

Gently, I slipped my hands beneath the arms of her cloak and lifted her up—truly lifted her, for she seemed to have no strength of her own. When we were both on our feet, gasping for air, I eased one of her arms over my shoulder. Her head tilted, disconcertingly, to the side.

"There," Neve hissed, narrowing her eyes at the silent Huntsman. "You have your toll. I hope you make good use of it."

The Huntsman bowed his head and opened his beak; from his throat came an eerie imitation of a heartbeat.

I could not help myself. "Ghoul," I spat, teetering off balance and struggling to keep Neve upright.

But the creature only laughed. *I do what I must, as all creatures do. If that makes me a ghoul, then, madam, you're a ghoul, too.*

Rage thundered within me, and—at last!—I felt the magic surge, but Neve caught my eyes, shook her head slightly. "It was a fair trade," she told me, as well as him, and I bit my lip to contain my protests.

Indeed, it was. And so the gate is open, the Huntsman spoke. He gestured widely; my narrowed eyes followed the backward sweep of his arm.

I saw nothing at first, but, of course, there was little light to see by. Bit by bit, though, the space behind the Huntsman lightened, and where once there were trees, there was now a clearing of tall grasses, spotted with dandelions. A path ran straight through the landscape, over a hill and beyond, toward the horizon.

I glanced to my left and right, and over my shoulder; the forest had vanished entirely. The three of us now stood in the clearing, in the light, in another place than we had been only moments before. I could not understand it, and I made up my mind not to attempt to. I must stay alert. I must be brave.

Some small, timid part of me startled at these thoughts—that foolish part of me which still wished to turn around and run back to the comfort of my orchard. But I could not run back, not even if I truly wished to. The forest was gone. I did not know where we were. The air had the hazy feeling of a dream, or perhaps another world.

"Come, Catalina," Neve whispered, directing her gaze toward the path.

'Til sunrise, little creature, the Huntsman said as he turned his back to us, walked away from the path, taking long, rustling strides through the grass. He moved quickly, and then quicker still, and as I watched, he became something dark, compact... He seemed to fold in upon himself, then widen, and within a matter of seconds, he was a true vulture, monstrously large, cawing and flying up and up to scratch his wingtips against the turquoise sky.

"Come," Neve urged me again, and I stared at her, slack jawed. Her eyes softened, but her mouth remained firm. "You are overwhelmed, I know, but I...we have only until sunrise, as he said. We must hurry. And," she sighed, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "I am useless without you, so I'm afraid you'll have to carry me a bit. Are you strong enough?"

I felt anything but strong. I felt *mad*. But as I gazed at Neve, and as I took comfort in the blossoms of pink returning to her cheeks, a swell of determination rose up within me.

"I can manage," I told her, voice steady. "Stay close to me. Here..." I wrapped an arm about her waist. "I won't let you fall."

"Oh," she said, and it sounded a little like a sob.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She blinked a few times and glanced away. "I just..." She shook her head; her hair—strange and lovely with its new shock of white—had fallen loose, and it traced shadows over the pale planes of her face. "I should be fine in a little while. It...it was bad this time. Worse than I expected."

"Neve, what did he—"

"Not now," she sighed. "Let's talk of this later."

"But—"

"Walk with me, Catalina. It's only a short walk. We'll reach the cottage soon enough."

I hoped this cottage would provide a more charming encounter than the one we had had with the Huntsman, but I did not allow my hopes to rise too high.

Our trek was slow and grueling. Neve was weak, and even though she gritted her teeth and pushed onward without pause, small cries broke from her lips, and her right hand clutched at the place over her heart. She leaned heavily upon me, and I carried her weight as best I could, but my bones grew sore. I eyed the lush grass longingly. If only I might sit down for a little while...

But then Neve urged me to keep going, promising that the cottage was not far, though we had already walked so far. My feet were blistered, bleeding inside of my boots.

At the castle, and in the Mad Forest, the air had had a sharp chill to it, but the sun shone fiercely here—wherever here might be. I grew so hot that I had to stop to unfasten my cloak. It fell heavily to the ground, and I kicked it out of my way.

Neve stared at me, silent, as I helped her loosen the clasp of her cloak at her neck. The lavender silk pooled like water in my hands. I folded it neatly and placed it beside my own rumpled, dirt-specked garment in the grass.

We moved onward, a two-headed, four-legged creature limping and panting beneath the midday sun.

I wished for water. I wished for rest. I wished for a cool breeze and an explanation.

But Neve was in no state of mind to talk. She looked grey, and she hung from me, scuffing her boots. The hem of her black dress was frayed and dusty. She was in dire need of rest, of healing, but I knew no medicine or healing spells, and she insisted that we continue on without pause, that our destination would appear at any moment.

And then, at last...there it was.

I had the strangest feeling upon my first sight of the cottage. I had never seen it before, and yet I felt drawn to it, as if the house itself had crooked its finger at me, beckoned me nearer.

It was an average-sized cottage, as far as I knew, with a thatched roof and white walls interrupted with square, crisscrossed windows. It was surrounded by trees—tall, sagging willows—and a stream ran behind it, down a short, muddy bank.

"Water," I sighed, and Neve nodded her head weakly. We lurched up to the stream and slid down the bank, our skirts billowing around us. I cupped my hands into the stream and offered a cool drink of water to Neve. She lapped at it with lazy eyes, like a sleepy kitten. I smiled despite myself. When she was sated, Neve waved a hand at me, lay back on the earth and sighed contentedly.

Heedless of the mud, I sat myself down on the bank beside her and shoveled handfuls of water into my mouth. The air still felt as misty as a dream, but the water tasted cold and real enough. I was so full of gratitude for the simple bliss of water that I failed to notice that someone approached on the lawn just behind us—until she spoke.

"Back so soon, Neve? An unnecessary risk, don't you think? I thought I told you not to—"

I raised my head above the line of the bank, and the voice halted mid-sentence.

"Stars!" The woman—tall and red-haired, no more than thirty years of age—clamped a shaking hand to her mouth. "Why, who are you? Neve, who is—"

"His seventh," Neve replied simply, "and her name is Catalina."

*

The tea smelled of apples. I cradled the hot, heavy mug in both of my hands and inhaled the sharp aroma.

"Our own blend," a fine-boned woman with short, bright, curling hair—Odele, she'd called herself—clucked at me, patting my head like, I imagined, a mother might, to soothe an irritable child. I wasn't irritable, only confused. I blew on my tea and sunk deeper into the plush green cushions of the chair.

Neve sat across from me in a similar chair, though its cushions were velvet yellow. Her legs were tucked neatly beneath her, and she leaned her head on her hand, tea mug ignored in her lap. I stared at her pointedly, but her gaze was unfocused, and she hadn't spoken a single word since the women had ushered us through the cottage door.

The first woman I'd seen, the red-haired one, was named Rose, and she sat cross-legged beside me in a scarlet-pillowed chair, peering so intently at my face, it seemed she meant to memorize it. I flushed beneath her gaze, beneath *all* of their gazes.

All six of them.

Suddenly, I felt very ill. There was a fire blazing on the hearth, and the apple tea was scalding my hands; my whole body was burning up. I resisted the urge to run back outside, throw propriety and politeness to the wind, and leap into the stream. The women were kind enough, but I did not know who they were or why Neve had brought me to them, and I disliked their probing eyes. No one had ever looked at me so intently—not my parents, not my husband. Perhaps Neve...

"Your age?" Rose asked abruptly, and I jumped, splashing tea on my hand. "Fifteen, sixteen?"

"I'm eighteen," I said, wiping my burned fingers upon my skirt. "But I have been told I look young for my age."

"Indeed, you do, and certainly *he* has a taste for youth!" Rose gestured toward the girl in the orange chair, a blonde cherub who appeared to be scarcely fourteen. I tried to remember her name—Amber, I thought. The introductions had come at me so fast, I was still sorting the names in my head.

My eyes skipped around the circle of chairs now. There was Odele on the cobalt chair, and Sal on the lavender one. Three cats purred on the

hearthrug beside Chloris, a soft-eyed, brown-skinned beauty with ivy leaves woven all through her hair.

And then there was Vinca, seated on my other side, dressed in a gown of shocking fuchsia. She was lovely; her face was smooth as porcelain, though twice as hard. It remained fixed in a calm expression of distrust.

I inhaled deeply, watching my watery reflection in the steaming mug of tea.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," I replied quietly, casting another glance at Amber. "Who has a taste for youth?"

Rose laughed—a disbelieving laugh. "Surely you know! Hasn't Neve told you anything?"

Neve shook her head wearily and spoke at last, though her eyes were closed. "Not yet. I wanted her to see for herself..." She gestured blindly toward the fire, the walls, the women. "She had to see—"

"You should not have brought her here," Vinca spoke in a low, measured hiss. "It is against your pact. You *know* the pact, Neve. He will take you back now. And he will not let you visit us again."

Neve straightened in her chair, setting her mug on the table beside her. "I do know the pact, Vinca, and I appreciate your concern, but that is precisely *why* I brought her here. This has all gone on for far too long."

"Whatever makes you think this *girl* will be able to—"

"Enough, Vinca." Rose placed her cool hand upon mine. "You are welcome here, Catalina. Vinca is our watchdog, but she doesn't bite."

Odele laughed lightly at that, and, to my astonishment, Vinca stopped sulking and winked at her, flashing a small, suggestive smile.

I glanced at Neve, my flush deepening. "Perhaps I should not have come. I do not like to think that my being here has caused...turmoil, and, in all honesty, I am still uncertain as to where *here* is—"

"Hush now," Rose smiled at me. "Drink all of your tea, rest, and soon everything will be made clear to you."

I stared down into my mug dubiously. The surface of the tea seemed to sparkle in the firelight.

"Drink," Rose urged me again.

I raised the mug to my lips, blew lightly, and took a sip.

I'm in my chamber, but I whirl about, disoriented. My hats are missing from the mantelpiece, the bedcoverings are a heavy, burgundy brocade, and there's a woman seated at my vanity table, brushing out her red hair, gazing at herself in a very large mirror carved of bleached wood.

My own mirror is nowhere in sight.

I approach the woman hesitantly, clear my throat to gain her attention. But she continues brushing, brushing, staring so intently into that mirror... I turn my eyes to her reflection.

Rose. I recognize her. Rose from the cottage.

All at once, I remember the Mad Forest, remember the six chairs positioned around the fireplace. But how did I return here? I have no memory of the journey. Did Rose bring me back? Where is Neve?

"You're not truly here, Catalina," Rose says then, dropping her pewter brush to the vanity with a startling clang. "Neither of us is here. It was the tea."

"The...tea?"

She doesn't turn around, but she tilts her head just a bit—to better gaze at me in her mirror, I assume. "Remember. The tea. You drank it, and then...what happened?"

"I..." I stagger to the side of the bed, lean against one of the posters. "I must have fallen asleep."

"Yes. You did."

"And now..."

"Now you're dreaming. Only it isn't a dream, not really. You see," Rose smiles broadly into the glass, "we brewed a cup of our memories for you. I truly think, Catalina," she says soberly, turning in her chair to face me, "that Neve is right about you. I think you will be the last."

I fall back upon the bed at sight of her face. In the mirror, she was lovely, with smooth skin and shining eyes, but now I see a death mask framed in lustrous auburn hair. She is a corpse, a creature neither living nor dead but something caught in between, like a—

"A ghost," Rose suggests helpfully.

I grip the bedcovers beneath me. "Can—can you hear my thoughts?"

She waves her hand—more bones than flesh. "It is of no consequence. And we have only tonight, so I shall be brief. You need do nothing. Simply sit upon the bed if you'd like. The shades you are about to see cannot see you, and they are no more real than—well, than me. However, you would do

well to pay close attention, for this is the past, and it mustn't be your future."

I cradle my head and close my eyes. "I don't understand any of this," I whisper, feeling desperate. I should leave. I should go to Neve's chamber. No. I should go to the orchard. I can think clearly in the orchard.

I always feel safe in the orchard.

I open my eyes, and Rose is no longer seated at the vanity. She is clutching the strand of garnet beads at her neck and staring up—burnished head tilted far back—at the high, filthy window. From this vantage point, I can see only the side of her face, but I gaze in astonishment; she is whole again. Alive. Her cheeks are flushed, and her chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm as she looks up toward the window and draws her hands together beneath her chin, shuts her eyes. Her lips move as if in a silent prayer.

"Rose," I begin, and the heavy door leading to Lexander's laboratory slams open; I recoil at sight of the all-too familiar shadow upon the floor. But when my gaze rises to take in my husband's face, his eyes chill me: hard and so cold, I shiver. Rose told me none of this is real, but my body revolts against that impossibility. I'm trembling, and I detest myself for it, for letting Lexander affect me so deeply. I can't erase the image of the knife in his hand—aimed for my heart—from my memory.

"Praying again, are you, my pious wife?" he sneers—at Rose.

Rose...Rose is his wife. Was his wife. I should have realized... And all of those women at the cottage, were they all married to Lexander? Six of them, and Neve said I was the seventh...

"What cares your god—oh, pardon me--goddess for a thing like you?" Lexander scoffs, screwing up his face into a grimace.

"Get out," Rose whispers, unmoving, her eyes still closed.

"My, you've grown saucy," he snarls, striding forward (I crawl backward on the bed, press myself hard against the pillows) and grabs her arm. "I'm tired of it. I'm tired of you."

"Toss me out, then," Rose murmurs, turning to face him with an expression of defiance. "I would rather be a beggar than your wife. Ha! Wife! Now, there's a laugh. Before I met you, I was a woman. I was a human being. Now I'm no better than your mice."

Lexander hesitates, takes a step forward and then a step back. He seems uncertain about something, but then he gives his white head a great

shake and strides forward purposefully. "All right, then," he whispers, tracing a line over Rose's glaring face, "prove to me that you are better than my mice."

"What—"

Lexander draws a knife—that knife—from his breast pocket.

I leap from the bed and hurl myself toward him. "You won't hurt her—" But my voice catches in my throat like a barb as I pass right through Lexander's body. And Rose—or her phantom—clutches at the air, blood spilling from her neck... She trips over the basket of apples at the foot of the bed as she falls and her head collides with the grey stones. Bruised fruit rolls wildly in all directions.

"No..." I breathe, falling beside Rose. I can't touch her, can't hold her hand, but it makes no difference.

She's dead.

And I realize in that moment that she has been dead for a long time.

"Dead!" Lexander spits, startling me. He unleashes a string of curses and kicks Rose's twisted body with the toe of his boot. His hands rake through his hair again and again; it stands up in wild tufts above his brow. "All for nothing!" he rages, scooping an apple from the floor and hurling it at the mirror on the vanity table. The glass doesn't break because his aim falls short, so he stalks to the mirror himself and slams it down to the stones.

"He lied!" Lexander wails like a spoiled child, stomping on the upside-down mirror to crunch shards of glass beneath his heel. "He lied, he lied!"

"Who lied, Father?"

My heart seizes. As one, Lexander and I stare in horror at the figure occupying the arched doorway. A younger Neve stands with her hand on the latch, green eyes filling up with shadows as they flicker back and forth over Rose's bloodstained body. "Father..." Her voice falters. She takes one step into the room, lining up her black-buttoned boots side by side, neat as a cat. "Father—"

"I've told you, never call me that!" Lexander lunges toward her, pushing her back beyond the door.

"Father..." She's sobbing—hiccupping little sobs that make her white face blaze carnation pink. "Rose—"

*"Out of my sight! Now! You're not wanted! You're not my daughter!"
He slams the door shut, shutting her out.*

In the hallway, she cries harder.

I breathe in great gasps of air, trying to still my shaking, but a growl erupts from my throat, and magic spins in wild circles inside of me. "How dare you—"

I'm sitting on the bed again.

Everything has stopped. Changed.

I blink and make fists of my hands. The bedspread beneath me—it's deep blue now instead of burgundy, and there's a tapestry over the mantel where there was once bare space: a unicorn slain beneath an apple tree.

I think I'm alone.

I edge to the front of the mattress and, heart hammering, peer down at the floor. Rose's body is gone, though a muted shade of crimson stains the stones.

I bring a hand to my forehead, but I can't feel the skin there, or the bone. I'm not real; none of this is real. None of this is happening.

But it happened.

I brace myself for what's to come.

Amber's next.

She tumbles from the laboratory with Lexander on her heels. He's squeezing her sharp, bare elbow; her sleeves are rolled up, revealing purple bruises upon her forearms.

Bruises I have, too, from the needles. I rub my arms and then pull my knees tight against my chest.

Amber is crying.

"I just want to sleep," she whispers, trying in vain to pull away from Lexander's grasp.

"Soon, soon," Lexander tells her. I watch him slide the knife down from his cuff, clutch it in his free hand.

Amber proves no match for his mad determination. She goes out like a candle flame, with a little whoosh and a sigh, when he plunges the knife into her chest.

This time, Lexander does not let the body fall. He catches Amber in his arms and carefully lowers her down, positioning her hands to rest lightly upon her blue-ribboned waist.

Then he rises up and stares down at her. Stares so long that I wonder if he's gone fully mad—or is, perhaps, feeling remorseful.

He begins to fidget: tapping his foot, checking his pocket watch, brushing the bloodied knife against his leg in an uneven rhythm.

"Breathe," he whispers fiercely, leaning over to stare into Amber's large, wide-open eyes. "Breathe, you foolish child! Now! Breathe!"

But Amber remains still, and Lexander hurls his knife toward the bed. I flinch and cover my head with my hands, curling up on my knees.

"No more," I murmur. "Please, no more..."

In mute revulsion, I watch as Lexander murders Vinca and Chloris, Sal and Odele. He uses the same knife every time, and after he kills them, he begs them to waken, to be not dead, and I can do nothing but stare and sob as my heart grieves for six women, six poor dead women.

Six wives—all dead. All haunting a strange cottage in a stranger wood, where Lexander's seventh wife, his last wife, still breathes.

*

I opened my eyes.

"Oh..." I sighed, rolling to my side and clutching my head. Reality crashed around me, heavy as wet snow. My eyes squinted, trying to make sense of the little bed I lay upon and the rough wall beside me. I recognized nothing, and I was grateful for it, grateful to be free of that chamber of ghosts. How had I passed so many nights in that room, in that bed? Blood and tears were seeped into the floors so deep; it was a mausoleum, a secret cemetery.

I pressed my face into the pillow beneath my head and screamed until my throat felt as raw as my soul.

Then I rolled over onto my back—vaguely aware that someone had stripped me to my chemise—and I let my head fall to the side. Neve lay upon another small bed just beside me, her dark head propped up on her elbow, her eyes low-lidded and startlingly green in the starlight streaming through the latticed windows.

"How long have you been watching me?" I asked her, tucking my arm under my neck and turning to face her.

Her brows rose. "Only a few hours." She smiled an open-mouthed smile; her tongue tapped at her little pointed teeth. "You surprised me—that was quite the scream."

"I had quite the nightmare," I sighed, shutting my eyes against the memory.

"So, you know now."

I shook my head and stared at her. "I...don't know what I know. I know that I married a monster. I know that he violently murdered his wives, would have murdered me if you hadn't—" I paused, and Neve drew back from my probing gaze. "You saved my life," I whispered. "I knew you did, but I don't know... Why did you do that? How did you know... I saw you, when he...when Rose—"

Neve pressed her palms against her forehead and turned away from me. "I told you, Catalina. I told you that you would hate me—"

"Hate you? Why would I *hate* you? *How* could I? Neve, I—I've never—I wish—"

She gasped. "Don't. Don't." She covered her face with her hands. "You don't *know* me. You don't know what I've *done*." The tears in her eyes reflected the setting stars, tiny wavering pinpoints of light. "Or haven't done. I wanted to stop him, thought of little else but stopping him, spent all of my time and energy attempting to undo the spell, but I just *couldn't*..."

"Tell me," I urged her softly, reaching across the space between us to take her hand. She hesitated to give it to me, but when her fingers tangled with my own, she grasped me tightly and exhaled a long-held breath.

Her thumb drew slow circles over the back of my hand as she spoke. "To put it simply..." She sighed. "I'm not human. Not truly. I am now, but at sunrise—"

"What happens at sunrise? The Huntsman—"

"I made a pact, Catalina, with the Huntsman. And with Lexander. I wanted to be mortal." Her pink tongue passed over her lips, and she shook her head. "I was so lonely. So alone. I could fly with the ravens, run with the deer, but my heart was as fallow as Lexander's fields. Can you imagine a world where every beauty is within your grasp...save one?" Her eyes swept over mine. "There are none like me. I am bound to Mad Forest, to the trees and the animals. And it is a vast, glorious place. If you could see it through my eyes..." She stared through the window, whispered, "Truly, it a wonder. But I cannot leave it. And I have no companion there besides the

Huntsman." Her mouth slanted sadly. "He is not unkind, despite appearances. He, too, is bound. Like me, like the ghosts." She gestured weakly toward the other beds occupying the room, and I realized for the first time that we were not alone. There were four other beds lining the walls. Vinca and Odele shared one, their bodies pressed closely together, and Amber and Sal and Chloris slept upon the other beds. Rose dozed in a willow rocking chair in the corner.

All of them were still and silent as stones.

Do ghosts sleep? I wondered, watching Amber's chest rise and fall in a perfect imitation of breathing.

"I had to escape. If only for a short time. I had to know what it meant to be held, to be cherished, to be..." She lowered her gaze. "To be kissed."

My lips parted. "Go on."

Neve's eyes trailed over the lines of our hands together, her mouth a down-turned crescent moon. "I've never been one for forethought or planning, Catalina. When an opportunity materializes, I tend to just...seize it." Her gaze rose, raking over my mouth. "So that's what I did."

I moistened my dry lips with my tongue. "How did you do it?"

"It was almost too easy. Lexander sought out the Huntsman. He wanted to make a bargain—for immortality."

"Immortality!" I blinked in astonishment. "*That's* his motivation, in all of this? Eternal life?"

"I'm afraid so," Neve sighed, and her thumb paused in its circling upon my skin.

"So, what—"

"The fool begged for the magic to grant his own immortality, and the Huntsman begrudgingly obliged by giving him a handful of seeds. Apple seeds."

"Apple seeds," I repeated dumbly, sorting the information in my head. "He planted them—The orchard in the circle of stones, the trees with the red-and-white apples..."

"Yes." Neve let my hand go and shifted suddenly, moved to sit upon the edge of her bed, nearer to me; her loose hair veiled her face from my eyes.

"But I still don't understand how you came to live with him, Neve. If you're...not mortal, as you said, then he isn't your father, and none of his wives were your mother—"

“And now we bring to light my shame.” She pushed her hair back behind her shoulders and massaged the skin over her sharply arched brows. “I told you—I wanted to be mortal, and Lexander wished to be *immortal*. So the Huntsman decided to make a game of it.”

My blood stilled. “What sort of game?” I whispered.

“A wishing game, I suppose.” Neve tilted her head, bit her bottom lip. Her hands lay motionless upon her lap. “But selfish wishes have a prick to them, a sting, and they never come true without exacting a price. I knew that, but I didn’t care. I wanted a kiss, and I was willing to pay for it.”

My forehead creased with confusion, and I, too, rose to a seated position, curling my legs beneath my chemise. “What did you promise, Neve? What was the pact that you’ve broken? What’s going to happen now —“

She held up her hand to the moonlight and glanced at the sleeping women in the beds nearby. “I don’t want to wake them. Perhaps we should take a stroll outside. Would you join me? It’s safe—I can promise you that.”

I took her proffered hand, entwined my fingers with her own. “I trust you completely.”

“Careful—” Brows raised, she gave me a soft, sideways smile. “You haven’t heard the whole tale yet.”

*

I craned at the stars, eyes questing for familiar patterns: the Winged House, the Weeping Tree, the Bear with a Silver Crown, the Drowned Maiden. But the sky held no friends for me; it was overcrowded with white and blue and violet orbs, dizzying and disorganized. Stars danced at the corners of my vision. I lowered my gaze to rest upon Neve, the only shape here I knew by heart.

We had left our cloaks behind in the forest and wore only our thin chemises, but, though it was full and truly night, the air hung warm around us, and a mist rolled just above the ground. I could scarcely make out my own feet for the fog. With a sort of macabre amusement, I realized how like ghosts Neve and I must appear, roaming after midnight in our nightdresses, faded to nothing from the knees down.

The back of Neve’s hand brushed against mine as we walked, and boldly, brashly, I grabbed it, held it tight. She tilted a glance at me, her

shining eyes wide, but there was no smile on her lips, and she quickly looked away.

“You were saying it was like a game,” I prompted her, slowing my pace and tugging on her arm just slightly.

“It felt that way at first.” She kept her eyes on the stream to our right as we walked beyond the shadow of the cottage. “Of course, the Huntsman never plays fair. As you experienced yourself, Catalina.”

I nodded, remembering the horrid pinching at my heart.

“He summoned Lexander and me—we had never met before that moment—and he told us that he would grant our requests, on the condition that we agree to live beneath a single roof and never *interfere* with one another’s requests: his attainment of immortality, and my taste of mortality.” She rolled her eyes at me and shrugged her shoulders. “We agreed—very readily. Foolishly, perhaps, though there was no way to guess how the Huntsman would toy with us.

“So he gave Lexander the apple seeds, and he gave me this...this body.” Neve gestured at herself, sighed. “But his cost was severe. He accelerated Lexander’s aging, and he made me a child, a little girl.”

I remembered watching a much younger Neve in my vision of Rose’s murder; she had appeared to be no more than fourteen years old. I peered at her now curiously. “How old were you—I mean...before? When you made the pact?”

“I never counted my years, Catalina. There was no sense in it. Why track time when I would live forever?” She pushed her hair back from her face. “But I was certainly no child. I was a woman, and the Huntsman had his laughs at my expense. You see...he didn’t only steal my years. He took my memory from me, as well.”

I heard the younger Neve’s voice in my head now: “*Who lied, Father?*” Heard, too, Lexander’s cruel insistence that Neve was not his daughter.

“You thought he was your father,” I whispered, feeling ill at ease.

“I had no memory otherwise. I supposed he must be. The servants called him my father... But I learned soon enough that—blood kin or not—he wanted little to do with me. That is, until he lost faith in his seeds.

“At first, Lexander was thrilled with the Huntsman’s gift to him. He assumed the seeds would grow trees of immortality, and they did grow up

and bear fruit within an unnatural span of time—mere weeks. But all of his tests were failures.”

My heart shuddered within me. “What...kind of tests?”

“On mice, at first. Sometimes rats. He had the servants catch them for him, and then he fed them apples from his trees.”

“Oh, Neve.” I lowered myself to a flat-topped boulder at the creek’s edge. “Did he give all of his wives the apples? He insisted I eat them with him every night.”

Neve granted me a subtle nod before sitting down beside me, her black skirt billowing over my white one. “He’s a cautious scientist. He conducted so many experiments upon those poor rodents, but in the end, they always died. The part that drove him mad, though, was...” She turned her face to meet my wide-eyed, fretful gaze. “The bodies never decomposed. They were lifeless, devoid of spirit, but as intact as the moment before their final breaths.

“So,” Neve exhaled heavily, “he turned to magic. And me.”

I reached for her hand.

“He supposed I knew secrets. He thought that, perhaps, the secret to immortality lay sleeping within me. So he taught me spells, equipped me with every herb and oil and shelves of rare books. And I reveled in it, I must admit.” She cradled her head in her hand. “But, still, I remembered nothing about my life before Lexander, nothing at all about the magic of my realm.” She shrugged. “He grew tired of me, and we got into the habit of avoiding one another.

“It was then that he took his first wife.”

“Rose,” I breathed. “And he killed her...”

“After feeding her his apples. He hoped she would rise from the dead—thus proving that the apples did contain eternal life within their flesh. Possibly, he thought, the magic would only work on humans. That would explain the dead mice. But Rose died.” She tilted her head back to regard the sky. “And all of the others died, too, despite his casting spells upon the fruit, and tampering with them in his lab for endless hours.”

I shook my head with disbelief. “Why did he never test his own mortality? He ate the apples, too.”

Neve laughed, her voice low and dark. “We are speaking of Lexander the Coward, Catalina. He would never take so brazen a risk with his own life.”

I leaned forward, hunching over with my arms crossed at my middle. It was all too strange, and too cruel. When I glanced at Neve, her eyes were closed, and she sat straight-backed, her skin luminous beneath the moonlight.

A fairy queen, my mind fancied, as her white-streaked hair blew back in the night breeze and trapped glints of starshine within its black strands.

Perhaps she was mortal now—but mortal in lifespan alone. Anyone who looked upon her would have to be blind to mistake her for one of our heavy, imperfect ilk. That I had not recognized her from the beginning shamed me. I had always dreamed of encountering creatures from the Avellan fairy stories—never truly believing that I would. And now I had, and my whole world must be rebuilt piece by piece, because if this—if Neve—could be, what other impossibilities might be proven possible, if given the opportunity?

"How do you remember all of this now?" I asked Neve, trying to rationalize miracles in my head. "If the Huntsman took your memories..."

"He did, but they were still locked within me. For reasons I was unable to explain, I couldn't bear to stay out of the Mad Forest, though Lexander disliked my going there. I wandered beneath the trees at all hours...and one day, I wandered over a different path, and I stumbled through a hidden door, and I found the wives' cottage. Only Rose and Amber lived there then."

"Did they brew you a special cup of tea?"

Smiling gently, she nodded. "I was frightened at first. But then I remembered. I remembered everything." Her face darkened. She raised her haunted eyes. "After I witnessed Rose's death, Lexander cast a spell upon his chamber. Cast a spell so that I could not enter, could not even see the door. Could not stop him as he murdered his wives."

"But wasn't that interfering?" I narrowed my brows. "Didn't he, then, break the pact?"

"No. It was a spell cast to keep me from his room, not to deny me my dream of mortality." She sighed. "I read all of my books, performed every counterspell. I called the magic, begged it to show me the door... But nothing worked." She caught my eyes, held them. "Until you."

I bit my lip, confused. "What do you mean? You broke the spell?"

"I think we both did," she said, her voice low. "Your magic and mine combined. Last night, I stood in the hallway—as I did every night, always

trying to find the door, armed with my sleeping charm—and I heard you quarreling, and I became so *angry*..." Neve turned away, her jaw clenched. "I could not *bear* it. Without a thought, I summoned the magic, and it felt different somehow—*bigger*. And I let it loose, and then the wall shimmered..." She looked at me with shining eyes. "And you fell through."

"And you caught me," I breathed.

"Yes."

"And you saved my life."

She bowed her head. "But I could not save the others."

I swallowed, staring down at my own hands. We sat in silence for several moments.

Finally, I whispered. "And now you must go back. To the forest."

She nodded, gazing softly at me. "As slow and unwieldy as this body is...I will miss it."

"Still, you got your wish. Your...kiss." I felt so small, sitting beneath all of those stars, sitting beside Neve, who had grown so large in my heart, there was no space for anyone or anything else.

Her deep forest gaze examined my face, flicking between my mouth and my eyes. "Did I?"

"Well... There was Mariah. And...perhaps others—"

She scoffed loudly; it startled me. I sat up straighter, narrowed my brows.

"Forgive me. It's only that—" Her face sobered so quickly that I feared I had offended her. "The truth is...I haven't got my wish, Catalina."

I shook my head. "But I saw you kissing—"

"Yes." She drew out the word, slow and sibilant. "But I have never permitted anyone to kiss *me*." Her mouth turned up at the corner, revealing the pink tongue within.

"Oh," I whispered, heart leaping, trying to gather appropriate words despite my betraying blush. "Oh... I am sorry, then, that you must return tomorrow, without—"

"I hope I won't have to. I mean..." Her eyes enveloped me. "Return...without."

"Oh," I said again.

And all I could hear was my breathing, Neve's breathing, the water flowing in the creek behind our backs, and, faint as dreams, the shifting of unfamiliar stars.

And then...

Choose to be brave.

Then I kissed her.

It was a chaste kiss, lips barely touching, but it lingered. When we drew apart, a small animal sound escaped my throat, and the space between our mouths shimmered; I mistook it for magic, and then I knew it as something even more primal, more intrinsic: a mingling of our spirits, mortal and immortal both.

I kissed her again.

We tumbled from the rock—Neve grinning against my lips—and we found a bed of grass and kissed and kissed upon it, and, breathless, kissed some more. Neve's hands swept my hair back from my face, her fingers grazing my brow, my throat, slowly drawing beauty from the dark well within me.

"You are..." A gentle kiss on my forehead. "...the fairest..." Two kisses upon my closed eyelids. "...of them all." Neve pressed her hand against my trembling chest as her mouth met mine, and her fingers worked to untie the front of my dress, and all I knew were stars—ancient, hot, singing—as her hand slipped beneath the fabric, questing, revering...

Sacred.

The word came to me unbidden, and I held it close. This...this moment, this woman, us: sacred.

My lips found Neve's heart, kissed her there. She tasted like trees and shadows and clouds. "Why did you wait?" I whispered, tracing a heart over her heart with my mouth. "To kiss. Why didn't you—"

"Why!" Neve laughed, her voice rich and deep and wild. "My darling," she breathed beside my ear, "I was waiting for you."

I shivered as her lips trailed down my neck, my bared shoulder, the delicate skin of my inner arm. "But how did you know—"

"I didn't know." Her tongue found my breast; I arched beneath her, and lightning flashed through my veins. "Sometimes hope is more powerful than knowing." Neve's fingers traced a trail over my arm, grasped my hand. "Come, beneath my trees...."

We rose together, our loosened gowns falling from our shoulders to the grass. We walked—bare, aglow—out of the clearing. With a wave of Neve's arm, a mass of flora parted for us, and beyond we discovered a nest of green leaves nestled beneath low-hanging branches.

In that moment, I remembered nothing of apples or mirrors, knives or death.

All I knew, wanted, tasted was our story...and I knew that—for the first time—this story was in our hands.

We fell upon the leaves together, imprinting one another's skin with tender, invisible words.

*

When I woke, the sun lanced my eyes. I was hot, and I was naked, and an ache burrowed deep within my bones as I rolled to my hip and gaped at nothing, acknowledging the empty space beside me.

“He took her,” Rose said, moving toward me from beyond the hedge. She held out my chemise, but I only stared at it; I felt as if my body were encased in stone.

“The Huntsman,” Rose went on, speaking to me in the sort of tone one uses with a child. “He came at sunrise, and she had to—”

“No.” I shielded my eyes with the back of my hand. “No, this is not the end, not our ending. This will not stand.”

“What... Whatever do you mean? You can’t challenge the Huntsman. He’s more powerful than everything. He *is* everything. He holds it all together—”

“Listen, Rose,” I interrupted her, thinking hard, “why did Neve need the Huntsman’s help to get here, to come to your cottage? She told me that she found it by herself the first time.”

She blinked and took a step backward, confused by the turn in conversation. “It was an accident that time. It wasn’t meant to happen.” She stared down at the white bundle of cloth in her hands. “So the Huntsman made certain it would not happen again, not without his knowing it.”

“But it did happen again. She has been here many times since, hasn’t she?”

“Yes. She liked to visit us. She carried such guilt, though none of us blamed her...” Rose pursed her lips. “Each time, the Huntsman stole her heartbeats as payment. She claimed it didn’t last, the pain, but over time, it became clear that she had weakened. Her magic had weakened.”

I stood up and took the chemise, slipped it over my head and began to lace the front panel. “I ask because I must go. How can I return to

Lexander's castle? Will the Huntsman prevent me from doing it? Can you show me the way? Can you come with me?"

Rose's lips curved into a bitter smile. "I'm afraid not, my dear. The others and I—we can't leave this place."

"Can't?" I raised a brow at her as I wrapped my twig-tangled hair into a knot at the base of my neck. "Why can't you?"

"He holds us captive. He has not let us go."

"The Huntsman does this?"

"No." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Lexander."

"But...why?"

Rose shrugged. "I think he still harbors the hope that our bodies will rise and breathe again. So he keeps them, watches them..." She shivered; revulsion slid over her face. "I feel him when he watches me."

I tilted my head in mute astonishment. Lexander had *kept* his murdered wives bodies? How? Where? But when I asked Rose, she said she knew nothing more, only that, if she or the other women attempted to leave this parcel of land, they found themselves thrust backward to the ground—trapped.

Rose came nearer, staring at my face openly. "You've been touched," she whispered. "Your eyes..."

"What about them?" I passed a hand over my eyes, felt nothing amiss.

"Never mind." She shook her head. "I wish I knew the path you must take to find the castle," Rose said, her mouth curving downward. "My advice is...just walk. That which you seek may guide your steps. Or not." She smiled sadly. "Either way, you must go. It isn't wise, Number Seven, to linger long in the company of ghosts."

*

I retraced the trail that Neve and I had followed, though my memory faltered, and I doubted every turn. I was relieved to come upon our cloaks, lying abandoned on the ground much as we had left them, though there were bits of feathers clinging to the fabric now, as if a family of birds had taken roost upon them for the night.

I gathered Neve's lavender cloak in my arms and discovered her earthy scent enfolded within it. A bolt of grief stabbed through me.

My lips still felt her phantom kisses upon them. My body still knew the weight of her body, remembered the yield and taste of her skin...

No.

I couldn't think on that, not yet. If I thought about it, about her, if I recognized her absence—

I would tilt into lunacy, as uprooted as a hacked-down tree.

So, mind blank, heart numb, I put on Neve's cloak and left mine for the birds to scavenge.

I had no plan, not truly. But some instinct compelled me onward, persuading me to return to the castle, though I had sworn to never set eyes upon it again. As I walked and walked, I gave up the notion of remembering our path, because every tree looked like the last one; it was so frightfully dark that I could scarcely be certain that the shapes looming on all sides of me were trees at all.

Barefoot, I tripped over roots and cut my soles upon sharp fallen branches. The pain was nothing in comparison to the yawning emptiness, and hopelessness, within me. I fought off despair by focusing on a single ambition, one clear thought: Lexander must be stopped. I must stop him.

The Mad Forest hulked, weighty against my shoulders, and I strained to catch even a thread of magic within me. But it was there, faint as a dandelion wisp. I took a weary comfort in it.

And I walked onward, my feet stamping bloodied footprints upon the soil with every step.

My soul, stomped down to silence, was a fragile, shredded thing.

*

I was ambling in a state between awareness and nothingness when I paused to squint my eyes, gasping in stunned recognition.

The orchard.

I had found the edge of the forest—had I been walking for hours, days, weeks?—and there was the orchard, just a short sprint over the lawn. The castle loomed beyond, but it was of no consequence: a course of action was beginning to take shape in my half-awake brain.

First, I needed to find an ax.

The stable boy thought me mad.

“But, Mistress, the Master told me to tell him if I saw you. I'm all that's here. The others've gone off to the fair at the village. The Master

said..." The boy—Otto—shuffled his feet in the hay. "He said you'd gone barmy, run off, that you needed a doctor—"

"All I need," I replied, careful to hold my voice steady, "is an ax."

"But—"

"Do you have one? I'll fetch it myself if you aren't willing to help me."

Involuntarily, Max's eyes fluttered to the rack of rusted tools pinned to the inner barn wall. "I can't help you, Mistress," he whispered, flustered, "but I can't stop you, either, from helping yourself." With that, he ran off, his hat blowing back from his head to float down to the ground.

I couldn't blame the child for fearing Lexander's temper. I only hoped he would give me some time and refrain from tattling right away.

I stepped onto the footstool, careful to avoid the jutting nails, and reached out to take the ax from the wall. It was heavier than I'd imagined; my arm sagged with the weight of it. When I touched a finger to its blade, my skin beaded blood.

Ignoring my protesting feet, I ran to the orchard—not my orchard, but Lexander's—beyond that forbidden circle of stones.

Never before had I examined these trees up close, and now I rested my free hand against one of the trunks; my eyes snapped wide open. The trees looked ordinary enough, save for their strangely colored fruit, but there was palpable magic coursing inside of them, so electric that it made my flesh tingle.

I gazed down at the ax in my hand dubiously.

Then my gaze narrowed at the castle. Lexander, I was certain, lurked somewhere within its walls.

He would never cease in his quest if something was not done to force him to do so.

And if he had no more apples, there would be no more tests, no more experiments. No more wives.

With a groan, I raised the ax to shoulder level and inhaled deeply.

Then I swung.

Then I screamed.

Someone lifted the ax effortlessly from my hands, and propelled by my forward motion, I toppled to my knees.

This is not the way, a sharp, familiar voice pecked inside my mind.

I glared up at the Huntsman, who held the ax in one of his taloned paws.

“You started this,” I spat at him. “Let me finish it.”

I will. But my trees will not die this day.

“Your trees...” My breaths were ragged; I felt as if my lungs were full of thorns. “What is the purpose of these trees? All of the wives ate their apples and died—”

The apples were not meant for them. The Huntsman dropped the ax to the grass and then, horribly, horrifyingly, knelt down to push his beaked face near to mine. *Do you think me a fool, girl?*

“N...no,” I stammered, edging backward, gasping for air.

Why would I create a means to immortality which any mortal could easily access? Can you imagine the chaos, the destruction, the mad fervor, if the word spread that these apples... He clutched one in his claw and shoved it beneath my nose. *...could grant eternal life?*

I swallowed, brow furrowed, trying to calm my rabbit heart.

Only one mortal paid the price for immortality. So only one mortal may partake of it.

Slowly, slightly, I nodded my head. “So Lexander is immortal,” I whispered, voice quivering. “He just doesn’t know that he is.”

The Huntsman laughed his animal yowl. *There is much that he does not know.*

I forced myself to stare into the shining black eyes. “What must I do? How can I—”

Take this. The apple that he held in his talons tumbled onto my lap, imprinted with deep claw marks. A fog of magic rose from it in a spiraling pattern, drifted away.

“What... But—”

It’s only an apple. Nothing more.

I groaned, raking my hands through my hair. “But what should I do?” I scooped up the apple, sticky with juice. “How can I use this—”

However you please. The choice is yours.

*

By magic or luck, I entered the castle and made a furtive dash for Neve’s chamber without being seen by Lexander. I closed the heavy door

quietly behind me, flipped all of the locks and shoved the couch over to further bar entry.

Then I tossed the apple onto Neve's altar and started reading.

There were hundreds of books; I panicked, uncertain as to where I should start, or how much time I had to spare. I grabbed one book down from the shelf only to toss it to the side in frustration when it did not contain any useful spells. Many of the books focused on cures for mundane maladies—stubbed toes, sore throats, the “headache that comes from too much drink.”

I stood swimming in a sea of discarded tomes, growing more and more frantic by the second.

Drowning.

“Calm down, Catalina,” I whispered to myself, gritting my teeth, trying to clear my mind. It was then that I remembered Neve's words.

Power is magic, and magic is power, and you have both within you.

A tear sprung to my eye. For a moment, I imagined her breath against my ear...

I exhaled heavily, and then I stepped away from the books.

Speak to the magic as you would to a friend. As you would...to me.

A ribbon of peace began to unfurl within me.

I knew what I must do.

Trust the magic, Catalina.

*

Lexander was not in our bedchamber, but his peeling knife lay upon the little side table, next to a sliced apple gone brown. My hand did not shake when I picked up the knife, when I pocketed it, wedged it beside the Huntsman's apple, and strode across the room to my vanity table.

In the mirror, I stared at the desperate face of a madwoman. Crazed, feral. Neve's cloak hung crooked from my shoulders, and my chemise was torn, dirty, its knot come undone.

My eyes, though, intrigued me. They *glowed*. The muddy hazel had given way to a startling, saturated green—green as... As Neve's eyes.

You've been touched.

The mirror's surface shimmered, like wind over water; I pressed my hand to the cool silver glass, and I spoke to the magic.

At once, my face changed, transformed; it reshaped itself as easily as warmed clay into a perfect sculpture of fair skin, red lips, gleaming emerald eyes...

“Neve...” I pushed at the glass, tried to reach her, touch her—but the mirror was impenetrable, and Neve-in-the-mirror mimicked my gestures exactly. She stared at me, her gaze as empty as I felt.

My hand moved to my face, traced the line of my nose... No, not my nose. Neve’s nose.

And Neve—*my reflection*—raised her fingers to her parted lips.

“I don’t understand,” I whispered, Neve whispered, but then I furrowed my brow and nodded, resolute. “I don’t *need* to understand. I simply have to...” My gaze searched Neve’s eyes, my eyes. I watched as the lips I adored formed that most magical of words: “Trust.”

I was reluctant to leave the reflection, to sacrifice the sight of it for sight of the man I most despised, but it was for *her* that I must do this. She had begun it; it was my duty to finish it.

I pressed a kiss to the mirror, to Neve’s closed mouth, my mouth.

I lifted the hood of the lavender cloak over my hair—which now, I marveled, lay black as night against my shoulders.

Then I rose and stepped toward the laboratory doorway, descended into the dark.

*

The torchlight cast orange illumination over the thick wooden tables laden with glass bottles and measuring tools. A flame burned beneath one of the bottles; within it, a shriveled apple floated in the bubbling, roiling water. I cast about the room, clutching the knife in my pocket.

Lexander was nowhere in sight.

I had never ventured beyond this part of the lab. I had never come here alone before. Normally, Lexander seated me upon the stool in the corner, drew my blood and placed suctioned devices all over my skin. He had tools that pinched me until my flesh bruised purple.

I glared at these instruments now, but not for long: my eyes moved to the closed doors against the far wall. There were two of them, of equal size, and as I stepped before the first one, a tingling pricked at my fingertips. My

hand had not even closed over the knob before the door, slowly, creaked open.

Before me came into view not another room but a large closet, stuffed full with crates and packages, bottles and stained bundles of cloth. I reached for the bottommost crate, a simple wooden box with a lid shoved beneath the shelves.

I pulled off the lid and bit my tongue.

Mice. Hundreds of them. All dead, I determined, as I peered down at their motionless noses, their airless chests.

Dead but perfectly preserved, as if by a taxidermist's skill.

I kicked the box back in place and turned to the second door. Again came the tingling in my hand, and the latch clicked, audibly releasing. My sparking palm nudged the door.

Lexander's neck snapped as he whirled in shock. He stood amidst a crowd of long, tall, narrow tables, his hands pressed flat against the bare surface of one of them.

"Neve!" he cried. "But...it's impossible. You broke the pact!" His face was haggard, unshaven, and he looked twenty years older. His eyes burned through me like frostbite.

I cleared my throat, afraid to speak. What if my voice gave me away, rendered my disguise useless? But Lexander exhibited no signs of suspicion when I told him, holding my chin high in imitation of Neve, "The Huntsman sent me back. To give you this." I produced the apple from my pocket, held it out to him on the flat of my hand. "Go on," I urged him, holding his gaze despite my private agony. "Take it."

But Lexander shook his head. "What is it? What will it do?"

I faltered. I did not *know* what it would do, did not know if it would do anything at all. Neve had told me once that hope could be stronger than knowing...

Neve had told me to trust.

"It will give you that which you most desire," I said, then, and some part of me knew those words to be true. I ventured a small, quivering smile. "What is it you desire most...Father?"

His eyes flashed, but I could tell that his mind was already churning, answering my question of its own accord. "I desire greatness," he murmured, and then he took a step nearer and glared at me. "I *deserve* magnificence!" He pounded a fist upon the tabletop. His voice boomed in

my ears even as he swiped the apple from my hand. “I want to be *huge*, so huge that my glory and breadth block out the stars themselves! I want to live forever!”

“So may it be,” I whispered, inhaling a shaking breath.

“Now, witch,” he snarled, “tell me where you’ve hidden my wife.”

“Your wife?” The word was like an arrow; it punctured my mask of calm. I narrowed my eyes, felt for the knife, hard and cool against my leg. I forgot my persona and spoke on my own behalf. “You have *no wife*. You have never had a wife.”

Again, Lexander slammed his fist against the table. “Tell me where she is!”

I stared at him coolly. With a jolt of sudden knowing, I realized that the monster before me no longer had any claim to me. He had never had any claim to me. I had been asleep for so long, too long, tangled up in a nightmare.

But now I was awake.

“No,” I said simply, moving toward him with slow, sore-footed steps. “You will never see Catalina again—I can promise you that.”

“I’ll tell the Huntsman! Again, you’ve interfered—”

I lay a palm upon Lexander’s chest and caught him in a barbed glare. “Listen to me. The end of our story has come. Here we part ways. I have only one thing more to tell you—” The words tilted on the tip of my tongue, but my eyes lowered to Lexander’s fist upon the table, lowered further still...

Amber’s vacant gaze stared back at me.

I pushed past Lexander, reeling around in horror.

Not tables... No, not tables—*coffins*.

Seven glass coffins, on wooden legs, in wooden frames... Amber and Rose and Odele... Vinca, Chloris, Sal. They were dressed in crisp black gowns, lace-gloved hands crossed demurely at their waists. I marveled at their smooth skin, unmarred by the skulk of decomposition, despite the passage of time.

They looked *alive*.

Perhaps the Huntsman's apples did transform them, after all, preserving their bodies...but not their souls.

I half-expected the women to sit up, to hurl curses at their murderer alongside me. But they were still and stiff as dolls; they did not breathe, did

not move.

I swallowed bile as I stared at the smooth satin linens within the lone empty coffin.

“For m—for Catalina?” I whispered, so repulsed by the grotesque display that I could scarcely speak.

“Naturally,” he simpered. “Of course, I still have hope that she will be my first successful subject, but...” He spread his wizened hands. “One must always be prepared.”

“Yes.” I nodded, curving Neve's mouth into the faintest smile. “One must.” My eyes fell to the apple still clutched in his hand. “Eat now, Alexander.”

He held up the fruit, examining it in the flickering orange light. “This came from my trees.”

“It did. The Huntsman handed it to me specifically, and, as my last service to him—and to you—I have brought it here.”

His eyes widened, regarding the apple curiously, turning it this way and that. “Perhaps... Perhaps it had to be a *certain* apple. Was that my mistake?” He lifted his brows, gazed round-eyed at the red-and-white fruit. “And now that you are no longer bound to him, perhaps he wishes to free me, as well...” He looked to me for confirmation, but I offered him nothing besides a cold, dark stare.

Again, I called the magic.

Alexander's teeth tore into the apple. His stubbled mouth worked furiously—chewing, chewing, biting...devouring every bit of skin and flesh, every seed. When he was finished, only the stem remained in his fingers.

“That... What—” His body lurched to the side, and he gasped. “What have you done, witch?”

I took backward steps as I watched wisps of magic pulse beneath the wrinkled skin of his forehead and his bare arms. I moved to the far corner, distancing myself from the glare of his red-streaked, maddened eyes.

“No...” he murmured, gripping his head with his hands. “No, this is not... This is not *right*!” He lunged toward me. “What have you done? What have you— You poisoned me!” His finger stabbed at the space over my heart.

“There was no poison in that apple,” I hissed, shoving his hand away. “Only magic, unformed. It has shaped itself to your thoughts, your own desires—“

“No!” Lexander screamed, flinging his head backward so far and so violently that I feared it would snap loose from his neck. His arms sprung away from his body, sticking out at his sides like the prongs of a wishbone. And then, his arms...they grew.

I stumbled away, grappling for the edge of my empty coffin.

“Make it stop!” he yowled.

Lexander’s arms were no longer arms. They stretched long enough to scrape the walls, and from them emerged hard protrusions, twisted and brown as...

As the bark of a tree.

“Oh...” I breathed.

I want to be huge, so huge that my glory and breadth block out the stars themselves! I want to live forever!

The floor began to crumble beneath my feet as Lexander’s trousers tore apart and his legs twined together, widened, forming an enormous trunk with roots creeping outward in every direction. I leapt away from a root busting the ground apart all around me and scrambled onto the slippery surface of the coffin, carefully rising to my feet upon it.

Only his head remained now; all else was bark and branch. I would not be so cruel as to tell him that he had been immortal all along, that he had only to trust the magic in order to live the life he lusted for...

Now it was far too late.

The trunk rose up, swallowed my last glimpse of Lexander’s face, and then it soared upward so fast that I screamed and covered my head with my arms. It was impossible to see; there were splinters in the air. It felt as if the whole world were breaking apart around me.

I took a deep breath and threw off the cloak. I knew my face was my own again, knew it as surely as I knew that Lexander *would* live forever...though certainly not in the manner he had envisioned.

The coffin lurched beneath my feet. Any moment now, the glass would shatter. I would be crushed by the tree, thrust down into the coffin that Lexander had intended for me.

It urged me suddenly: the instinct to *move*.

I jumped, aimlessly jumped, and my arms looped, frantic, around a seizing branch. I felt my body rising, heard the castle crumbling...

I wished I might have told Neve that I loved her, only once.

*

It was the knife that woke me.

With an empty-lunged gasp of air, I started, rolled to my side upon the wet ground and pulled the sticky blade from my pocket. Its metal gleamed with blood, my blood, and I stared at it for a long while, gazing blankly at my warped reflection.

Then came the pain. It was hard to pinpoint; every part of my body screamed in equal measure. But then I remembered the knife. Heedless of the impropriety—I sensed, vaguely, that a little boy lay flat on his stomach across the lawn—I peeled up my skirts and tilted my foggy head to consider the gash on my thigh.

It looked, I decided, quite deep. But the bleeding was thickening, slowing.

Half-blind with pain, I crawled toward Otto, the stable boy.

“Are you,” I croaked at him, unable to muster the air for more words, though I thought them hard, hoping in my irrationality that he might hear them somehow. *Are you all right? Are you hurt?*

He turned his head to look at me, his body flat and still. “Miztriz,” he mumbled, and his eyes fluttered shut.

“No,” I whispered, reaching out a hand, resting it upon his thin shoulder.

He was barely breathing. Clenching my teeth against my stinging limbs, I sat up on my knees and gently turned the boy over.

His shirt was buttonless and torn, and I saw with horror that his narrow chest had been deeply impressed, as if it were impacted by something large and heavy. A stone, perhaps.

I had not yet permitted my eyes to survey the rubble all around us, but I was aware of it, just as I was aware of the magic, shimmering in the peripheries of my mental haze.

I called it, the magic, with barely a thought.

“The boy,” I mouthed, when it came, hovering in the space between us, as if deciding which of us were most in need.

Otto’s body seized and arched.

I watched, eyes wet with tears, as the magic restored muscle, bone, flesh. Otto’s chest rose up, and his skin smoothed, faded from purple and

black to a hearty pink. A moan escaped his dry lips, and then he opened his eyes.

“Mistress,” he gasped, staring at me with wide-eyed disbelief. “I saw a light...” His glassy gaze moved away, focused up, on the tree branches overarching us. “And then I saw a door, and I opened it, and then I saw...I saw you, here.” He sat up, palm rubbing at his mess of hair. “I had an awful dream that—oh.”

I followed the direction of his stare and felt something deep and ancient swell within me. The castle was no more, but burst forth from its rubble towered the most incredible, magnificent, star-scraping tree... Its leaves sparkled like emeralds on a regent's crown, and its branches canopied the entire sky.

“Oh,” I said, too, and my tears fell.

Otto didn't ask any questions. Perhaps he didn't need to. He just looked up at the tree, looked at me, and picked up a fist-sized rock, examined it in his hand—a remnant of the ruined castle. “You're hurting, Mistress,” he said, then, dropping the rock and pointing shyly at the tear in the fabric of my skirt, dark with blood.

“Yes. But I'll be fine,” I told him, and it was true: I could already feel the magic wending a path within me, repairing my broken parts. “You must run to the village. Tell the others what has happened. Tell them...” I hesitated. “Tell them that neither Lexander nor myself survived.”

“But, Mistress—”

“And tell them that this tree is a holy thing, that it must never be harmed.” I gazed at the spiraling trunk, and a thick lump formed in my throat. I whispered, “Too many lives were sacrificed so that this tree might live. Honor them by honoring it.”

In the turn of Otto's face, I glimpsed the shadowed planes of a haunted soul. “I will tell them, Mistress. But, Mistress...”

“Yes?”

“Are you... Are you truly dead?” He shivered, drawing one knee up to his chest.

“No. But I am going somewhere else now, and no one must waste time searching for me. Or for Lexander.” Reflexively, I trailed my eyes over the grand sweep of the branches above us, and then I lowered my gaze to rest upon the edge of the Mad Forest.

Otto swallowed. "All right, then," he whispered. "And I'm sorry I didn't give you that ax."

He took off like a rabbit with a fox on its tail, never glancing back once.

I lifted my skirts again to find the gash knit together; only the dried blood upon my skin suggested that there had ever been a wound at all. My breath still came in thin little puffs, but I found that I could stand, even walk without wincing.

I approached the tree.

It truly was a marvel, an impossibility made real. With a chill, I wondered if Lexander's soul had been absorbed into the whorls of the bark, wondered if his mind still thought thoughts and dreamed mad, invincible dreams.

I still had the knife in my hand, gripped so hard that my fingers ached. Now I knelt down before the trunk of the tree and, sighing, thrust the blade into a gap between the monstrous roots. "Never again," I whispered, letting my forehead fall to rest upon the bark.

Catalina.

I tensed, stood up.

Catalina...

My heart stopped for a single moment; then it beat double within me, pattering like rain. Slowly, I turned away from the great tree, and I looked to the forest, and I saw someone standing amongst the pines, someone strange, someone I did not recognize, not at all.

But my heart knew her.

I ran.

"Neve!" I yelled, gasping at the air. My feet sank into the marsh, but I raced on, tripping, crawling, running until I reached her, until I stood breathless before her, holding my breath before her, because she was too lovely, far too lovely...

She was composed of the elements: earth and air, water and fire. Her mouth was upturned, a teasing flame. She wore a short skirt of animal skins, knotted at her hip, and her bare flesh was shadowed a pale, dusky green. Her hair hung down over her pointed ears to graze her thighs, and in its darkness, I glimpsed the blue iridescence of waterfalls.

Her eyes, though, were the same eyes—sparkling green and deep as forest pools—that I had gazed into, fell into...

“A fairy queen,” I exhaled, and Neve laughed, startling me from my misty-eyed gazing.

Not quite, she said; I heard her words in my head, *felt* them: cool and green and soft as feathers. Her lips formed a smile, and I stared at her mouth—this new mouth in this new, fey face. *How do you feel?*

“I...” I placed a hand to her cheek, but I could barely feel her; it was if my hand rested upon the threads of a spider’s web. “Oh... You are beautiful.”

Her smile softened. *You saved them, you know*. She rested her wispy hand upon mine. *You set them free*.

I pulled back. “No, the bodies—” I lowered my eyes and swallowed, trying not to remember the sound of glass breaking and wood collapsing, though I knew I would never forget it, not for the rest of my days. “Rose and...all of them... They were crushed—”

They were buried. Slowly, carefully, Neve brushed a damp lock from my forehead. *Their souls have moved on, Catalina. The order of things has been restored*.

For a long moment, I stared at her, slack-jawed and still with shock.

Then I kissed her.

It was a gentle kiss, a barely there kiss; she tasted like light and earth and shadows, and she kissed me back, a hand against my chest, smiling against my mouth.

Then Neve pulled me nearer, but it was not enough, this ethereal contact. We might as well have been two ghosts embracing.

I drew back, gazed at her soberly.

My darling, what is it? Is it Lexander? The shock of all that’s happened? That tree—

“Oh, the tree,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I don’t understand... It’s just so...beautiful. How could something so beautiful come from...from him?”

Neve sighed softly. *Lexander surrendered to the magic, let it make of him what he was meant to be*.

I laughed humorlessly. “He was meant to be a *tree*?”

Yes, she replied simply.

My mind pondered this as I inhaled deeply, as I cast a glance over my shoulder and then turned back to fully face Neve. “Then,” I began, hesitant, “perhaps it is my turn. To become what I am meant to become. To be with

you...truly.” My voice cracked as my hand touched her and yet didn’t touch her. “And always.”

Oh... Neve eyed me steadily. Are you certain?

I held her shoulders and kissed her again—long and lingering, though she felt as insubstantial as a cloud. My fingers grazed her hair, her cheek. “I am very certain.”

She smiled; it was a smile I was just beginning to learn but had already learned to love. *Then close your eyes and call the magic...*

The lightning came fast, coursing through me like undammed water. I submerged myself in the light; verdant light filled me, suffused me from my crown to my toes, and I felt my body changing, felt my *soul* changing, into that of a creature so different and so alive—wildly, madly alive.

I was reborn.

I examined my green-tinged hands and held my hair up to the light; it shone an amber gold. I wondered if I, too, had a new face, a new shape... I wondered how I must appear to Neve.

I looked up, gazed into her eyes, and, all at once, a fire sparked within me. She was no longer a ghost beside me but solid, real; her mouth was warm and firm against my mouth. My heart beat a new song inside of my chest. *Forever*, it promised me. *Freedom. Trust. Love.*

Neve drew back from our kiss, trailing her hand, teasing, over my neck, and inclined her head toward the black brush behind us, the thick, teeming Mad Forest. “Shall we?”

I reached for her hand and offered her a shy smile. “I wanted to tell you something first...”

“Oh?” She drew my hand to her mouth, kissed the palm. “I’d like to tell you something, as well.” And her body, her lips pressed against me—soft as snow but hot as magic—and the whisper fluttered, winged, into my ear: “I love you, too.”

FIN

Braided

A Lesbian Rapunzel

by Elora Bishop

I was born cursed.

When I came into the world, my mother held me up, looked at me under the full moon's light, and bellowed to the stars. She knew what the lines upon my skin meant. But she refused to let me—her one and only daughter—become another casualty of the curse.

So my mother, the witch, made up her mind to change my destiny.

She threw bones and blessed the birds, performed all manner of spellwork, until she at last understood what was necessary to remove my fate.

My mother is not a wicked witch. She is only a mother, and a mother does for her child what she must do. Still, her plan was wicked enough: the fate could only be fully removed from me if it was sewn into another person.

Time passed, though not much time. My mother could not risk much time, because the guardian was old, weak, and likely to fall at any moment. If he fell, died, her cursed little daughter—me—would be drawn up to take his place. Bound for my whole life to take his place. And then there would be nothing she could do to save me.

I was small, three years old, when my mother drew out her shears, loomed over me with black, glinting eyes. It felt like a dream when she lay me down on the well-scrubbed boards of the table, a dream when she muttered words I could not yet understand.

I remember closing my eyes to shut out sight of the blood. My blood.

She carved the fate from my chest and sewed me back up with tiny stitches of spider's silk string, and she rocked me to sleep when I sobbed because I felt so hollow.

My fate fluttered in a small glass jar, and it looked petal-soft, luminous, not unlike a moth. My mother put the jar on the top shelf of her tallest spell cabinet. But it was not there for long.

The day the jar disappeared, Zelda came.

*

Morning. Sunshine spilling into the hollows the blankets make, pooling over my fingertips, across my face. I open my eyes and let the sun burn them. Blinded, I turn away, blink back spots of purple and turquoise and scarlet. I rise, stretch and stumble before I find the washbasin, before I pull on my hose and my wooden shoes and run the bone comb through my hair. Thirty brushes, my mother has always told me, to keep evil from my mind.

She stayed up all night working on a fertility potion for the miller's wife. There are bottles and little boxes and books open upon the working table, and my mother is slumped to one side, head pillowed on a great tome, breathing deeply and evenly. Asleep. I quietly gather a bit of bread, a wizened apple, a little crock of goat's milk, and I'm out the door before she stirs. Zelda must be hungry, and I can't bear to make her wait.

All she does is wait.

Birdsong shocks me awake when I step outside, pulling the door closed behind me. Birds are everywhere, roosting in the lower limbs of the pine trees, fluttering overhead, some quarreling, some food-searching, all singing. Spring crept in this year on soft padded paws, and the countryside is fragrant with flowers and herbs. And it's crawling with people. More and more people come every day to the witch's cottage in the forest, looking for love potions—or cures for love. Most of them, though, come to buy charms for fruitful wombs. Our countryside is fertile, but its people are not. So my mother obliges the childless, the loveless, with magic potions and herbal teas and careful, bewitched words spoken low.

My feet tread quietly over the well-worn path. I don't think about where I'm going; I don't have to. My feet know where to step, mindful not to trip on the protruding roots. I pass through the forest corridor, feet soft on the pine-needled, root-crossed earth, prickly branches hushed and close, tree fingers trailing across my shoulders and arms.

And then the sky opens up suddenly, and there's the clearing, and there *it* is: the tree.

The tree was beautiful once, the tallest in the forest, if the stories can be believed. But the tree died, and that's where the stories begin to differ. Some say lightning struck the trunk. Others whisper that a curse was laced

to the bark of the old oak, and it poisoned the wood. Some claim that a great beast tore its claws through the head of the tree, destroying it in a single blow. And still others believe the gods themselves slayed it, as it was too grand and beautiful a thing for mortals to possess.

But how it happened doesn't matter, not really.

The tree is dead. It has been dead for hundreds of years.

The platform was built upon the severed crown of the tree. The wood of the platform is older than generations, and yet it does not rot. It's part of the miracle, the pilgrims whisper, when they make their journeys to the tree. They don't call it "the tree," though, not like I do. They call it the Holity. They bring their prayers and their wishes to the Holity, and they bring their requests for spells to my mother, but she's just a side trip, like a stop-in at a tavern when you come to a village for a doctor. They don't come to see my mother; they come to see the Holity.

They come to see Zelda.

She's awake, I see, as I approach the tree now. There were so many pilgrims yesterday, as there are every day, and Zelda looks tired. She's not that far up, a little higher than two horses' heights, but she might as well be a cloud, or the sun, or a star.

I inhale deeply, the air cool in my lungs, and I stare up at Zelda. The pain comes fast, a familiar heart-deep pain that blinds me for a moment, erases Zelda's solemn face and replaces it with my own. Because it should have been me upon that platform, bound for all my days to that platform, and it should have been me with hair grown long enough to sweep the ground, hair long enough to weave cloth and make an ogre's coat from.

Hair that the pilgrims tie their wishes to with dirty ribbons and string, or bits of their own hair, or lace. Tiny wishes written on scraps of folded paper, bound now to Zelda's brown waves. Sometimes, in gratitude, the pilgrims plait flowers in her hair, too, or make little braids. Zelda's hair is always filled with wishes, more and more desperate wishes.

"Good morning, Gray," she whispers down to me, her voice thin, ghostly. Zelda lays upon the platform, her hair suspended high above her head, wrapped around the jagged twigs and branches to ease a bit of the weight before it falls down, down, to brush the roots of the forest floor. Her chin is in her hands, and she watches me with a little smile.

I never understand how she finds the will to smile. I feel her smiles like blades buried deep within me.

“Milk today,” I tell her, and I take the little crock from my basket, put it into the smaller basket attached to the rope that Zelda can draw up to the platform. “The goats have been driving their little ones away lately,” I chatter, putting the bread in the basket, too, and the apple. “The smallest kid is growing a nice black-and-white coat. You would think her pretty.”

Zelda reaches an arm through the railing and pulls up her basket, the pulley wheel squeaking. She takes out the crock and the bread and the apple, breathes in the scent of the goat’s milk.

“Wonderful,” she sighs, and she drinks the milk down. The robins come, curious, and sit upon the platform beside her, begging for crumbs. Zelda gives them a corner of her bread, and they peck at it, greedy. I want to tell her not to share her food. I bring the food for her alone—though, in truth, she does not need it. The tree takes care of her, as it has taken care of all of its guardians. She never truly hungers or thirsts, and she does not require bathing. Her skin glows, and her hair gleams and smells of green growing things.

But she enjoys the food, the milk. They’re ordinary joys in her extraordinary days. Her circumstances allow for so few pleasures. There’s no need for her to feed those fat, greedy birds. Still, watching them eat makes her laugh, so I hold my tongue.

“What did you dream, Gray?” she asks me, cocking her head just like her robin friends.

I look down at my hands, at their white knuckles. I never tell her—can’t ever tell her—the dream I dream every night. It’s a bit of clockwork I cannot remove from my days, no matter how many charms I charge against it. So I think fast and say, “I dreamed that there was a man with...with a goat’s head. And he asked me for milk. But I did not have any to give him, so I gave him strawberries.”

Zelda laughs a little at my made-up dream. “That’s very silly, Gray. But I like it.” She takes another sip of her milk. “I dreamed that the moon came down and kissed me.” She speaks so softly, I have to stand on tiptoes to hear her; my heart flip-flops when she whispers the word *kissed*. I can’t look at her, keep my eyes low.

I hear the robins trill as they flutter away.

“A very sad woman came yesterday,” says Zelda then. I sigh, raise my gaze to watch her comb her fingers through a strand of her nut-brown

hair. “She begged me for children. They often beg for children.” There is no judgment in her tone, no sadness, only wonder.

I sigh again and drop to the ground, sit back on my heels. I stare at the bits of paper tied in Zelda's long locks. Which of these scraps contains the sad woman's wish for children? How many of them speak of children, money, of royal favor, of luck, of possibilities beyond those their fates have prescribed?

We don't talk much after that. Sometimes we like to sit in silence. Sometimes we don't need to say anything to each other.

When Zelda lowers the crock, empty now, in her basket, I take it up without a word, trace my finger along the smooth rim—where her lips touched.

And then I begin to gather the scraps of paper from Zelda's hair. She sings a little while I work. It's not a song with words but a humming song, a la-la-la song. Carefully, I untie the ribbons, remove the flowers and twigs, and when I'm done, when I have a basketful of wishes at my feet, I take the little comb from the sack in my skirt pocket—a witch's sack, packed with healing herbs, a needle, a vial of moonlight, charms for traveling, and Zelda's comb—and set about combing out the tangled strands, thinking my own tangled thoughts.

Birds like to carry away bits of Zelda's hair for their nests. Magpies mistake the sheen of sunshine in it for gold, steal clawfuls of it. It must hurt her a little, their pulling and tugging, but Zelda doesn't complain. Even the pilgrims take cuttings now and again, greedy to keep the magic with them. This, too, Zelda allows.

Would I? No, I wouldn't. I hate the pilgrims for their neediness. I hate the birds for begging Zelda for crumbs. I hate the hair. I hate the platform. I hate the tree.

I do not hate Zelda.

“What is Momma Bone up to today?” Zelda asks, as I work at a particularly nasty snag. I pause, the comb still in my hand. It unnerves me when she calls my mother that, my mother's magical name, the name the supplicants call her. Zelda bears no ill will toward my mother, but she doesn't know the whole truth, and that knowledge makes me feel sick with guilt.

I rub my eyes with the back of hand, and then I comb at the snag again, gently. “A fertility spell. And love potions,” I mutter to the hair, to

the tree, to Zelda. "She's always working on love potions."

Zelda sighs wistfully and leans down over the creaking boards of the platform. "Tell me about some of the lovers?"

This is the only reason I watch my mother while she's working, eavesdrop on the whispered conversations she shares with those who seek her spells: to collect stories for Zelda. I breathe out heavily.

"There was a boy yesterday," I say. "He's in love with the king's son. But it won't work out."

"Why won't it work out?" asks Zelda, her eyes wide.

"The boy is a peasant. The king's son is...the king's son."

Zelda shakes her head, rakes her fingers through a strand of her hair. "No, Gray. Love has no limitations." Her voice is certain, patient. "If he loves the king's son, and if the king's son loves him—"

"I don't know if the king's son loves him," I interrupt her, feeling a bit cross. "But Mother gave him a potion, so..."

"Ah," says Zelda, with a small, knowing nod.

I've told her all about my mother's potions. A love potion may or may not work on the king's son. Some people are immune to the spell. But even if it does work, the peasant boy will wonder for the rest of his life whether he is loved genuinely or by the grace of magic alone. His will not be a happy ending.

We don't say any of that aloud, though. Zelda mumbles something about her hopes for him, and I work even more gently at her knots.

She doesn't really understand. How could she? She's bound to this tree; she can never leave it, and her perceptions of the world are secondhand, borrowed from moaning supplicants and...well, from me. And I, as my mother warns me often enough, have a skewed view of the world.

"Gray," Zelda whispers, and I shrink a little, because she's using *that* tone, the one that always leads up to the words I fear, the words she gives me nearly every day now. I wave an arm in the air, trying to push her thoughts off, but she voices them, anyway: "Gray, you should go from here. You should leave, and you should—"

"No." I let go of her hair, and I stand, gaze up at her, set my mouth in a hard line. "I won't leave you, Zelda," I say, as I always say.

She does not reply, only sighs, as she always sighs.

I pick up my basket and shield the sun out of my eyes with my hand as I look up at the girl on the platform, the Holity's guardian and captive.

She dangles an arm over the edge, waves her hand lightly. “Tell Momma Bone hello for me,” Zelda says.

“I will.”

And then I move to the jutting roots, and I stand on the very highest one, crooked upward like a knee. I stand on my tiptoes, and I reach up and up, straining. Zelda nudges her body nearer to the edge of the platform, pressing herself flat on the boards, reaching through the railing, down and down. And barely, just barely, our fingers touch.

“Tonight,” I tell her, and I leave down the same path, passing a woman holding a baby with a patch over its left eye.

The approaching trail of supplicants is already long, a ragged line of gray. When I reach the cottage, I am weeping.

*

It was my unlucky fate to serve as guardian to the tree. Why, I do not know, and my mother will not tell me. When I ask her, she mutters the words against evil, mutters them over and over and over again until I cover my ears, hide up in my room, never getting my answer. Probably there is no answer, but that is hard for me to accept. To be cursed at random, by chance, seems crueler somehow.

My mother lied to Zelda’s parents, I assume. Perhaps she tricked them, or maybe she made them a bargain they could not afford to refuse. All I know is that my mother took Zelda away from her family when she was very small. I do not know who her parents are—or were, or what became of them. I’ve never asked, and Zelda never speaks of them, either.

I remember, in a hazy sort of way, the night my mother smuggled Zelda into our cottage. It was midnight—the witching hour—and there Mother was, having flown down the chimney with a soot-covered girl in her arms, a little girl like me. But Zelda had brown hair, and I had black, and she smiled when she saw me, and I stared at her in fear. And when my mother got out the shears—still stained with my blood; my mother had not used them since—and clutched in her hand the little glass jar with its fluttering fate, I understood, instinctively, what was about to happen.

Like the moment my mother cut the fate from my chest, that night, too, felt like a dream. I remember so little. But I can still see the bright

robin-red of the blood gleaming on the blades, and I can still feel Zelda's breath against my ear, whispering, "Don't be afraid."

*

The roots of the tree extend everywhere in the forest. Our cottage sits on a big clump of them, all knotted and angry and dead. I kick one of the roots hard as I slouch toward the cottage's door and am rewarded with an aching big toe.

"Gray?" calls my mother's voice from within the cottage.

I go to her.

She's still seated at the table, eyes small, muzzy, as she scans over scrawled lists of herbs. "Gray, please fetch me a cup of tea," she tells me without looking at me, and I obey, crumpling a handful of dried leaves in her big earthen mug. The water in the kettle is already hot, always hot, thanks to a clever spell of hers. I pour the water over the leaves and place the steaming mug on the table. My mother takes it up without looking at it, either, and drinks deeply; her mouth never burns no matter how hot the water is. Another spell, I suppose.

"Zelda says hello," I mutter reluctantly, feeling ridiculous. Mother doesn't hear me, or acts like she doesn't. So I grab her empty mug and throw it against the wall. It shatters, big chunks of pottery bouncing upon the unswept floor.

But my mother doesn't flinch. She keeps reading over the lists, the lists, the lists.

I pick up the pieces of the mug, trace my fingers over them, gluing them back together with little scraps of magic, and then I'm in the kitchen, my head in my hands.

I do not hate my mother, I remind myself.

I hate the tree.

I repeat those words in my head so often, my own personal charm to keep the screaming at bay, to quicken the dull, pointless hours spent in between my visits to Zelda. My mother is lost to the world of spells, and I am lost to a world in which terrible things happen to good people.

Good people like Zelda.

I take a deep breath and go outside to my mother's garden, the basket of wishes swinging on my arm. There are all manner of growing things,

creeping things, vined things, within the garden's sharp-staked walls. It's walled off from the world, the little gate latched and locked with a key.

No one ever goes into my mother's garden, except for me. The lock is needless. Who would dare steal from a witch? But my mother insists that it be kept locked, that the walls remain.

So I sigh each day as I fiddle with the lock and key and let myself in to bury the wishes from the Zelda's hair.

My mother rarely comes here anymore. She only remembers the garden when she asks me to gather the herbs she requires for her spells. There are dried herbs in her spell cabinets, and bunches of them hang from the rafters, but fresh herbs, she claims, produce the strongest magic.

I have done little herb magic myself. My mother has taught me a paltry sum of magic, truth be told. She keeps promising to show me how to cast the air spells—ascending, floating, hovering, descending. Basic education for any witch. But she is too busy, and I am too distracted with my worries for Zelda.

I reach down now and brush my fingers over the leaves and stalks and blossoms. I know plants have a spirit, a heart all their own. I never learned that; I simply feel it to be true.

I inhale deeply the green all around me, and I pause, as I always do, at the rampion.

Without a moment's hesitation, I kneel down in the dirt and begin to dig. The rampion and all of my mother's plants are magically grown throughout every season. Snow may fall everywhere else in the forest, in the town, but it never touches my mother's garden. I'm not sure which winter spirit she spoke to, bargained with in order to make this so, but my mother's garden is fruitful, always. I am not allowed to take anything for my own use, but still, every day, I dig up a single rampion—as I do now. I eat it, and it is wet and sharp in my mouth, a crisp, cool root.

I love rampion, must have rampion. It frightens me sometimes, this craving, this need. This small, desperate indulgence in my small, desperate life.

As I chew thoughtfully, I stare down at my hands. There was a smaller rampion clinging to the one I just ate, and it rolls back and forth in my palm.

Zelda has never had rampion. She won't ask where I got it, and my mother will never know. I tuck the root into my skirt pocket.

And then I turn over the basket and begin to bury the paper wishes in little holes I dig into the rampion bed. I bury them all here, bury them every day—and they seem to disappear, eaten up by the soil. I have never found any old wishes that I have buried, not even when I've looked for them, tried to dig them back up again. Mother doesn't know I do this; neither does Zelda. It's a secret, my ritual.

I leave the garden and while away the lonely hours with chores, and performing little tasks for my mother. I feed the goats and tidy the cottage and boil cabbage soup for supper.

When the sun finally begins to sink below the horizon, I prepare Zelda's basket, hiding the extra rampion in the bottom of the basket, beneath another crock of goat's milk. Zelda loved the milk so much this morning, and there's extra, plenty to spare. More bread, a bit of cheese this time. I'll save the dried fruit for tomorrow. I have to be careful, because Mother complains when I take Zelda too much food. Zelda doesn't need to eat; we do. But there is always enough.

I take a book down from one of the shelves, the small green book that Pim gave me, full of silly poems. If it's light enough when I get out to her, I'll read Zelda a few pages. I put a candle in my pocket, just in case.

The last of the supplicants wait patiently on the path. I pass by them. They have probably been waiting for hours. But they always listen to me when I tell them it's time to go, that Zelda is exhausted. Their eyes follow me now, full of shadows.

In the clearing, I hurry past the line of people, run toward the tree.

There's a woman on her knees before the dim cascade of Zelda's hair. I look up to the platform, up at Zelda, who sits serenely, legs dangling loose over the edge of the wood, her hands clasped in her lap. The woman before her is sobbing softly, gasping with slight sighs and shushes of breath. She holds her head in her hands.

I touch her shoulder gently, and she straightens, stiffens, stands. She looks at me with red-rimmed eyes, lowers her gaze and nods. Then she turns to go. The other supplicants follow behind her, a slow and shuffling procession.

Soon enough, Zelda and I are alone.

My eyes rest on a scrap of paper wrapped around the nut-brown strands. The paper is white and torn, but it's run through with gold bits of

thread. The scrap glints in the soft shafts of setting sun pooling between the saplings and highlighting the thick roots.

Zelda sighs and smiles down at me, shaking her head a little.

"You should have let her finish," she says, an admonishment, but her voice is kind.

"You need your rest," I tell her simply, and then I'm removing the milk and the bread and the cheese and the little rampion from my basket, depositing it all into Zelda's basket.

She wheels the basket up, licking her lips as she smiles down at me, eyes shining. I sit on the ground, legs stretched straight out, leaning back on my arms, and I watch the sky while she eats.

Zelda doesn't mention the rampion—I knew she wouldn't—but when she says, "Thank you," her voice sounds different, and when we press our fingertips together, she lingers, holding my gaze.

It's too dark to read her a silly poem. Maybe I will tomorrow.

*

I have woven so many charms against the dream—the one that comes to me night after night. I've borrowed magic from my mother's cabinets, pored over her books in search of the right spell to banish this dream from my mind. But I'm not a trained witch, and I don't know the right charms, and I don't dare ask my mother for help.

So the dream comes, again and again.

I'm dreaming it now.

Zelda has short hair. That's the first thing I always notice, and marvel at. She has short curling hair that twines over her ears and at the base of her neck. Short curls, soft curls. She smiles when she sees me, as she smiles every day when she sees me. Her face lights up like a star. She steps forward, and suddenly I know we're on the ground, both of us *on the ground*. The empty platform hovers above as Zelda wraps her arms around my shoulders and kisses me.

Everything is silver and blue.

When she steps away from me, lips turned up into a smile—*my* smile—my entire body, burning in heartbeat, skips a beat. My heart flutters against my ribs, an urgent bird, and I tremble. Every part of me trembles. Zelda threads her fingers through mine, as I have imagined her doing a

hundred thousand times, and when she kisses me again, I feel her smile rather than see it, feel the curve of her lips against my mouth, so soft.

Music wakes me. It always ends the dream, this music, though it's part of the dream, too: a strange, jerky melody, full of clicks and whirs. It's like nothing I've ever heard in my waking hours.

And then I'm lying on my bed, heart thundering, the night still and heavy and dark outside the window. I rub at my eyes, cover my face with my hands, and—even though I know my mother won't hear me, and wouldn't come if she did—I put the pillow over my head and cry as I curl up on the straw-filled mattress.

I love Zelda, love her deeply, have loved her every moment of every hour of every day since that first day. And it is a fruitless thing, this thorn of love lodged in my heart, because Zelda is bound to the tree, and I am bound to the tree and my mother. And there is nothing I want more in the world than to set Zelda free, but that would be...the most impossible of acts. It would require a magic far beyond my own, far beyond my mother's.

But it's in these stolen moments in the dark before dawn that I think impossible, wild thoughts, *anyway*.

It always comes back to the tree. Once, long—so, so long—ago, the tree *lived*, and people came to it, tied their wishes to its branches, and the wishes came true. And the tree grew more and more beautiful, and the people were hopeful, fruitful. It was a holy thing, a, sacred relationship.

But something happened. The tree began to die. Or died outright.

And the people had never known life without the tree, could not imagine life without it. They held a council with their best magicians, their most skilled witches, and together, the people come up with a plan. They cast a spell to capture the tree's spirit before it drifted away to nothingness, to capture it and change it and *contain* it.

They put the spirit in a human body.

They hadn't considered the consequences, but they couldn't have predicted any of this. How could they have known that the person who contained the tree would be forever bound to the tree, physically unable to leave it? They learned early on, after the first guardian died, that they could no longer control the spirit, could not direct it to enter a particular person, a person who volunteered to be a vessel. The spirit, the fate, chose its own guardians, and the chosen had no choice in the matter.

Children were born with blackened veins on their chests, upraised lines that connected together to form the image of a tree, a gnarled, hulking tree spread over the space above their hearts. These children were destined for the platform and the prayers from birth.

No one questioned it. In truth, the chosen had no free will in the matter: when a guardian died, the next guardian was already positioned on the platform, having been drawn there by a force that pulled them along, all through the forest, that showed them where to place their hands and feet as they climbed the great tree. They were always in place at the right time, when their new guardianship was about to begin and the last guardian was moments away from death.

It happened to Zelda that way. We talked about it once, only once. She was with my mother and me in the cottage for six days before the tree called to her. Her feet haven't touched earth since.

In the dark hours of night, huddled beneath my blankets, I curse the tree.

The pilgrims' wishes often come true, but sometimes they don't. Perhaps no one else has noticed, but I have. Each year, fewer and fewer prayers are answered, fewer desperate wishes granted.

My wickedest want is for it all to cease. No more prayers, no more wishes directed to that tree, to Zelda.

I have a pair of shears hidden beneath my mattress, the same pair that took my fate away and gifted it to Zelda—and now I touch their cool, slick metal with my fingertips. I keep these shears at hand for that most-hoped-for day: when all the prayers stop. I'll run down the forest path to Zelda, climb the tree, rest upon that sacred platform I am never, ever allowed to touch...and we'll cut off every inch of her hair.

I'll set her free.

Am I a coward that I haven't dared this thing yet? Sometimes, when I'm alone in the darkness, I think I must be.

There is a yawning emptiness in my heart, but it's not from any cut-out fate.

*

“What did you dream?”

She's watching me curiously because I do not answer for a long time. Finally, I lie, "Nothing. I dreamed of nothing."

She tilts her head, still watching me. I open the book and clear my throat, preparing to read to her.

"I dreamed that you were standing beside me," she says then, voice quiet.

I can't look up at her; my heart is hammering against my bones, against my empty spaces, and everything is suddenly hushed and close. I swallow.

"Gray," Zelda says so softly.

I look up and up at the platform, at the beautiful girl on the platform, at the girl who holds my fate behind her own ribs, at the blackened veins that peek out above the collar of the white shift she wears. I press my hand over my heart, over the translucent scars I must never show anyone. My mother made me promise.

If you gaze at my scars in the light, they form the ghost of a very old tree.

"It was dark," Zelda says, and she's smiling a small smile. "There was music, I think. Strange music, not like any of the songs you've taught me. And we were together. We were standing together."

When she says nothing more, I widen my eyes at her, hungry for her voice. "What did we do? Did I...did I tell you a joke?" I manage to say, though the words are lighter than I feel. I have no jokes in me, have never had a joke in me.

"No," she says, and it's odd, the way she cocks her head, her eyes locked on something far away.

This is the day the world begins to unravel.

*

I cannot get away from her fast enough. It's shame—I know it's shame—that eats me up in tender, tiny bites. Why am I ashamed of my dream, of my feelings? Is it because I believe Zelda could never love me—me, the cause for her captivity?

My mother sewed the fate into Zelda's breast, but it was *my* fate, *my* fate that should have bound *me*, not a generous, gentle, wonderful girl. It is because of *me* that Zelda suffers on that platform. Me. Only me.

I race back over the path, back to my mother's house. I press my hands to my head, lean against the side of the cottage, sliding down until my knees are tucked up to my nose, and I breathe in and out, in and out. The whole world is spinning.

Zelda did not tell me her entire dream, but I had the strangest feeling when she looked at me. There was a knowing in her gaze, in her smile.

She mentioned music...

Was it possible?

Did Zelda dream my dream?

Dreams are the last sacredness a person possesses against the violation of magic. Magic can dig deep into your thoughts and feelings, change them, warp them. But magic can never touch your dreams. If Zelda and I dreamed the same dream... What could that mean? And when she gazed at me like that...

I lift up my shirt, tears pricking at my eyes, and stare down at the ghost tree on my chest, the tree that was once black.

Zelda could never love me. I am stupid to think otherwise. I have no right to wish for it.

I rise, shake out my skirts. One of the little goats scampers away from his curious, nearby rambling, almost running into my mother's sharply pointed garden fence. I follow the kid and step toward the garden, place a hand on the gate latch, fish out the key hanging on a cord beneath my shirt.

"Gray?" calls my mother from inside the house, making me pause. I grit my teeth but follow her voice, dropping the key back to dangle down over my breastbone, hidden like my scars.

Mother is standing before the great bookshelf, sitting on a stack of books that teeters precariously beneath her. She peers down at me over her spectacles. "I finished that potion for the miller's wife, and I was wondering if you'd be a dear and take it into town."

It's not a question, not really, and as she finishes up her mumble of words, she's already looking away, fingers dancing lightly over the gold-lettered book spines.

I stare up at her for a moment, slack jawed.

But I snap my jaw shut, and then I'm at the table, plucking up the tiny vial that took days for her to create. The liquid inside is murky, sharp-scented with its myriad of herbs. I drop it into my skirt pocket, grab a kerchief from beside the door.

Soon enough I'm far down the road, passing supplicants left and right on their solemn walks to the Holity.

Everything inside of me is burning. I feel helpless, suspended and small, worthless. I wish harder than I've ever wished before: I wish *I* were the one up on that platform. I wish Zelda was free. I wish we had never met.

No.

I don't wish that.

I take it back so quickly I suck in my breath, pausing on the dirt road. No. I could never wish that.

But I do wish I were guardian in her place.

The miller makes his home right at the outskirts of Red Spring, our village. I trundle along, so deep in my thoughts that I am blind to all else. I pay little attention to the yellow-white sunshine, the birdsong, the fox that bounds across my path. I see it all as if from a thousand miles away.

When I reach the mill, I stop and watch the water work through the wheel, and the sight calms me somewhat. Then I'm standing at the old blue door, knocking.

The miller's brother, Pim, lets me in. He's a red-faced boy of about my age, and he and I used to play together when we were smaller. I taught him which mushrooms were safe to eat, and he taught me how to catch fish with my bare hands—though I always threw them back in the stream.

We don't see each other often anymore, Pim and I, but he offers me a smile that spans from ear to ear.

"Bella said you might come, Gray. I hoped I'd run into you before I left for the square." He gestures me inside with a wave of his arm. "You look—" He frowns as I step into the room. I turn to face him with a lopsided smile.

"I look terrible. I know," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "I've just been...thinking a lot today. That's all."

"Ah," Pim nods his head in mock seriousness. There's a teasing glint in his brown eyes. "Thinking is mankind's greatest blight. That's why I avoid it altogether!"

"You do not," I laugh, crossing my arms at my waist. "Or have you stopped writing poetry? Please don't tell me you have."

"It's in my blood, as magic is in yours." His mouth is still smiling, but his tone is somber. "I couldn't stop writing even if I wanted to."

Just as I could never stop loving Zelda, I think to myself, shifting my eyes away.

The miller's wife, Bella, glides into the room at that moment, pulls me into a tight, warm hug. "We have missed you, Gray." I hand her the potion bottle, and she takes it from my hand so carefully, holds it before her eyes as if it's the most precious thing in all the world. And it is, to her.

Pim leans against the wall, grinning, as his sister-in-law scolds me for coming so far without a shawl. And then Bella is pressing a dried apple into my hand, along with a little bag of gold. Most people do not pay my mother with gold or silver, have no gold or silver to offer. The weight of the coin is heavy against my palm.

"Thank you," I say, sliding the bag into my pocket.

"Are you going to the fair tonight?" Bella asks me, tucking the bottle into her tall china cabinet, behind a plate painted all over with winged children.

I blink and shake my head. "No, I don't think so. Which fair is this one?" I spend my days at the cottage or with Zelda. Village affairs are of little interest to me.

Bella puts an arm about my shoulder. "The Not-There Fair," she whispers into my ear, raising one dark eyebrow meaningfully. "Maybe you should dawdle a bit on your way home." And then she winks and whisks herself out of the room, calling for her husband.

"Come," Pim says, leading me back outside into the sunshine. He points toward the distant village square. "You can hear the music if you close your eyes and listen."

I cast Pim a sidelong glance, but his eyes are closed now, his face smooth. So I close my eyes, too. And I hear it.

The hairs on my arms rise up, and there is a little tapping, as if from a bone, at the base of my neck. The music... A click-clack-whir of too-familiar music spiraling on and on—spiraling deep within me.

The music grows louder, a strange, eerie cadence swirling like dust, like sand caught up in the wind. I take a step forward, open my eyes. I can't see the Not-There Fair from here, but suddenly, I *want* to see it. Need to see it.

"Maybe I'll run into you at the fair tonight," Pim says, waving his hand at me, edging back toward the house. "I could introduce you to my boy, Clare. He's meeting me there. I think you'd like him."

"I'm sure I would," I smile, but my mind is still wrapped around the music. I wave to Pim, pick up my skirts and hurry toward the square.

As I get closer, the music intensifies, and I begin to slow, slow...until I'm nearly dragging my feet. One corner more, and I'll see the Not-There Fair. I've heard people talking about it in years past, when it moved through town. I never gave it more than a moment's thought.

But this music... It's the music from my dreams, and there is such a strange sensation rushing through my bones and blood. It's an excited feeling, a scared feeling, as if I'm standing on the edge, about to leap from a towering height...

I can't bear it any longer. I take a few steps, and I'm around the corner, and the village square opens up before me, all straight lines and familiar shapes, but it's sheathed in spangles of blue and silver. Lanterns hang from brightly colored ropes strung around the outskirts of the square, and neatly peaked tents of blues and grays crowd together at the center. There are suns and stars and sparkling, decorative things everywhere I cast my eyes. And there are people. Many people.

I don't much like folk on ordinary days, but I draw nearer to the crowd as a young man steps up on a box covered with moons: grinning crescents painted in purples and blues. He starts to shout, then stops, struggling to be heard over the people's murmurs, and over the music. He wears a pointed silver cap, and his blue jacket shines with metal stars.

He twirls his little moustache and smiles broadly, spreading his arms wide.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we welcome you to the circus of dreams, the carnival of wonders, the miraculous mirage of magic that appears today and will disappear at midnight, like a specter: the Not-There Fair! We are not open *yet*, but I assure you, at sundown, if you dare to return, we will awe you with treasures of light and delight. You will not be disappointed!"

Some of the people are moving away now, but I step forward, approach the man on the moon-painted box.

"That music," I say, raising my voice to make certain he'll hear me. "Where is it coming from?"

He looks at me, surprised, and suddenly leaps down. "The music?" he asks, and I'm nodding as he smiles, cocks his silver-capped head. "Do you like our music? It is dreaming music from Chimera."

"Oh. I think—" I begin, but he shakes his head at me, beckons me nearer with a crook of his finger. I lean in.

"If you would like to know more," he whispers, "you must come back at sunset."

I frown. "I don't know if I—"

"Good day!" Abruptly, the man strides toward the nearest tent—cobalt blue velvet dotted with silver tassels—and shrugs underneath the door flap, disappearing from sight.

I stand still for a long moment, mystified. Dreaming music, he said. From Chimera.

Somehow, I must return tonight.

*

"Chimera," Zelda breathes. "What a lovely word." She's pressed low to the boards of the platform, dangling a hand down through the railings.

There are a few firelights out tonight—the first of the season. More and more of them will appear every evening, until at last they hover in twinkling clouds all over the forest. It will look as if the stars have fallen and are dancing with us upon the earth.

Zelda holds out her hand, and one of the little insects floats up, cupped delicately within her palm. I stare at Zelda, at her soft face, at her fingers curved around the glowing creature.

"He told me I must come back tonight, if I want to find out more about the music." My voice shakes a little. I'm feeling dazed and dazzled, still carrying within me that on-the-edge sensation.

"Then you *must* go," Zelda urges, nodding. "It's important to you. Where did you say you heard that music before?"

I hadn't said. I'd just told her that it sounded familiar.

"It's just..." she begins, and the firelight takes off from her fingertip, glowing as it twirls away in uncertain, chaotic circles, toward the pine trees. "The way you describe it..." She looks down at me, wondering. "I feel as if I've heard it before, too. Isn't that strange?"

"Very," I say, and I'm standing, dusting off my skirts. And then I climb upon the tallest root, straining on my tiptoes. Tonight, when we brush our fingers together, there's a lightness there. I stare up at her face as she stares down at mine. Her hair is a halo, spiraling away like starlight.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” she whispers, gives my fingertips the smallest of squeezes. And then she rises, moves away from the edge of the platform. I can’t see her face anymore. There’s a heaviness in my heart as I step down from the root of the tree.

Zelda keeps her back to me, and she sings a wordless song.

It would be so easy to ascend the tree right now, to climb it until I reach the platform, swing myself through the railing. I have visualized that act of blasphemy a hundred times a day. I’ve planned out which foot would go into which knot in the trunk, which handholds would offer me the best grip.

I lower my eyes as I turn away from Zelda and head back to the cottage. I walk for only a short while before I pause, lean against a prickly pine tree. The needles scratch my face, but I don’t move away. Zelda’s supplicants have all gone. I am alone with myself and the firelights pulsing in the dark. They make no noise at all as they dance and glow.

Everyone depends on the tree.

I grip the pine bark under my palm, slices of it creeping up and under my fingernails. The stab of pain makes my eyes water.

The Holity is important. It mustn’t be meddled with. It is holy.

Zelda is holy.

I gulp down air then, because I have such unholy thoughts, such profane imaginings. It has only made matters worse, I think, to have heard that music from my dream. If I go to the fair tonight, everything will change. Somehow, I know that. It’s a firm, nestled knowing at the root of my heart.

I make my way down the path I could walk with my eyes closed, and when my mother’s cottage comes into view, my chest tightens, everything sharply outlined by the rising stars. My thoughts are a tangle in my head, all wishes and wantings and wickedness.

There, in the doorway, stands my mother.

Her hands are on her hips, nose tipped up to the black sky, and when I step out of the forest, her chin tilts down.

She’s staring at me.

“The Holity? How is it?” she asks. I pull my shoulders back, switch the basket to my other hand.

“Zelda is fine,” I say through clenched teeth. The Holity could be burning, and I wouldn’t care. How dare she ask about that tree instead of

Zelda?

She raises a brow, steps aside, ushering me into the cottage. My heart is rising up toward my throat, but I swallow it down.

We eat a late supper in silence. I don't look at my mother—I can't—and I'm climbing the ladder up to the loft, up to my straw-filled mattress and the shears buried beneath it.

I stare about the room for a long, breath-held moment. It's odd, the thoughts that flutter through my head: that I have never left my childhood home, have never slept in any other bed but this one. I could not leave Zelda, even if I wanted to leave my mother. And I had wanted to...so much.

I do not hate my mother. She has told me, in rare moments of honesty, that she never wished to cause me so much grief. She caught me once, weeping in the garden. She said nothing, but she gave me a gift of walnuts afterward, my favorite. I gave them all to Zelda.

I know that she knows. She knows that I love Zelda. But she also knows that I cannot save her.

My mother has done her best to make life good for me. But it's not enough. It could never be enough. Zelda is trapped, and nothing can be done, but something must be done. Something *must* be done.

I go to my window, unhook the catch, spread the wooden shutters wide. The firelights glow in the air, and I stand, palms pressed flat to the windowsill, taking everything in—the wonder of stars overhead, the crescent sickle of a growing moon along the horizon.

All is hushed, expectant. Waiting. I breathe out slowly, slowly, close my eyes, and listen.

My mother is putting herself to bed. I hear her familiar, shuffling sounds.

And from the distant town square comes a clicking, whirring, clacking strain of music...

I go to my bed quickly, push up the mattress, feel beneath for the cold slick of metal. I take up the shears and stick them in my belt. They are comforting, real, and I need that tonight.

Everything changes tonight.

I move to the window, hike up my skirts, climb onto the sill. It creaks beneath me, but I throw a kiss to the moon for luck. I turn around carefully and lower myself by my arms, reaching with my toes for the rose trellis a few feet below.

I feel only the nothingness of air for a heart-stopping moment, and my arms weaken, but then my feet scrape against the trellis, and I fold up, swing down until my hands grasp the wood.

I feel suspended and weightless, star crowned as I hang for a myriad of heartbeats beneath the sky. And then slowly, slowly, I lower myself to the ground.

A trained witch would fly to town, would have flown down easily from my bedroom window. But I have learned no spells for flight. And it doesn't matter what I have learned or what I know, because my two feet are firmly planted on the earth now, and I am out of the cottage.

I don't look back. I don't think about my mother's rules. I run down the path that leads to the road that leads to the village, and the shears press against my side sharp and cool, and the shush of my breath is loud in the dark stillness.

And the music, like a ghostly finger, beckons me onward.

It grows louder and louder as I run. There is no one else out in the moonlit night, though I can see shadows and fires ahead, all along the village streets. The Not-There Fair, I know, from the town gossip, is an event of merriment; the usual way of things are dismantled for a night. It is brought by travelers from a distant place, far, far removed from Red Spring.

My entire world is the Holity and Zelda, and I have rarely contemplated anything—or anywhere—else. Though, in the dark of night, when I wake from my dream, sometimes I imagine taking Zelda away from the muck of her, our, cursed fate. I imagine a home, a life that has nothing to do with Red Spring at all.

But those are only fantasies.

The music grows louder still, and finally my shoes step upon the cobblestones of the village. Now the melody is almost a physical thing, thrumming within me, and I reach up to touch the air, wondering if I might be able to catch the notes in my hand. I follow the uneven beat through the meandering streets, follow it until I reach the square.

"*There* you are!" calls Pim with a great wave of his arm. He jogs toward me, a tall boy by his side. The boy removes his cap when he sees me and smiles.

"Isn't this exciting, Gray? It's even more grand than last year's fair. I think there are twice as many tents," Pim laughs, throwing an arm around the boy's shoulders. "I'd like you to meet Clare."

"Hello," I say, taking Clare's hand for a moment.

"Hello. Pim's told me you're a witch."

I shrug my shoulders. "I'm only a witch's daughter. I know very little magic."

"Well, I'm a cobbler's son, and I can't cut a sole to save my life."

Pim laughs again, pulls Clare close. "But you're a wonderful dancer. Won't you join us, Gray?" He begins to lead Clare toward the crowded dancing quarter, its boundaries shining with blue lantern light.

I feel the pull of the music, tap my foot to its rhythm. I scan the square for sight of the young man with the silver cap. "No, Pim, I'll just walk around a bit. Enjoy yourselves," I smile distractedly.

"You'll love the Not-There Fair!" Pim calls as he and Clare hurry off, arm in arm.

It is almost midnight, but there is light everywhere, illuminating the streets as brightly as midday. Lanterns in the shapes of stars and moons are suspended from slanted poles, throwing off a colorful light, beaten silver metal flashing, and the tent flaps are proudly opened and staked. Fires burn brightly on the cobblestones; the flames flicker over faces strangely, rendering townsfolk I have known all my life unrecognizable.

And, oh...everywhere is wonder.

There is a juggler beside me, throwing up star-shaped bits of wood on fire. He winks at me and bows when he catches me watching, but I walk past him, into the thick of the crowd. I gaze at a beautiful woman dancing on the back of an alicorn. An alicorn! Its mane is plaited with gold, its bridle set with brilliant, flashing sapphires. They whirl in a little circle beneath a lantern in the shape of a sun. I see a small dragon swallow a man who suddenly appears out of thin air on its peacock-colored back. A trio of brown bears dance together, then begin reciting poetry (not very good poetry, but it's poetry, nonetheless), and a lioness and a blue-haired woman begin to slowly waltz.

Everywhere I look are strange, lovely creatures, and even lovelier people. All is blue and silver, firelight reflecting off finely set gems and metal bits, fabric swaying in the night-cool breeze.

And then the young man with the moustache steps before me and winks.

"Welcome to the Not-There Fair," he whispers into my ear, and suddenly—right before my nose—he holds up a glowing butterfly. She is

white as snow and opens and shuts her gleaming wings more slowly than a heartbeat.

I reach toward her, though I know that she's an illusion, a mirage... but she's so beautiful. I can't help but want to touch her. She closes her wings and dissolves into a handful of silver glitter that the man blows before my eyes, sparkles obscuring my view of the fair.

"The music," I press him, and he cocks his head, laughs.

"You still wish to speak of the music? That's the reason you have come? What about all of this?" And he spreads his hands, encompassing the performers, the men and women and creatures shining moon bright.

I shake my head, touch his wrist. "I am a witch's daughter," I tell him. "Magic is not what I am searching for." He laughs again, but I am stubborn. "I *must* know about the music. You see, I've heard it before. In a dream." I swallow, staring at him. "You mentioned Chimera—"

"I have nothing more to tell you." He slides out of my grasp, slippery as a fish. "Go to the sea-blue tent." He points. "She is waiting for you there." I look past the lights, the crowd, to the tent, and when I look back, of course the mustached man is gone.

The milling villagers and performers move as if in a dance, in a pattern I can almost make out. I touch no one, though the crowd is thick, and soon, I am standing before the only tent with a closed flap.

"Come in," breathes a whisper near my left ear, though no one stands beside me. I shudder a little, but this is why I've come. I lift the flap and enter.

There are hanging lanterns, fractured stars lighting the brightly colored rugs heaped thick upon the floor. A very old beast sits on a lump of silver-threaded cloth, bright eyes fixed on me. I notice a pillow across from the creature, and I suppose that's where I must sit, so I do.

The beast is hairless, wrinkled, but she has long whiskers, pointed ears and a twitching nose. I think I am looking at the most ancient cat in the world—or perhaps something else entirely. When I blink my eyes slowly, the creature blinks slowly back at me.

"Your people," she says, sharply annunciating the words, "are a strange sort."

This surprises me. I sit back on my knees, straight-backed. I fold my hands in my lap and remain silent, waiting.

A rough pink tongue comes from between the creature's lips, licking all around the cleft mouth. I decide she must be a cat, though a very large one.

"You put such stock in magic, you see," says the cat slowly. "You pray a great deal, and you do it in the oddest of ways."

"You mean the Holity," I whisper, and the cat nods. I can hear her bones creaking.

"Where we come from, things work very differently." She smiles a cat smile, pushing her whiskers forward.

"I came tonight to learn about the music." I wave my hand to indicate the melody spiraling around us. "You see, I dream—"

"Of course you've dreamt the music." The cat rolls its green eyes. "Don't be dense, girl. It is almost midnight."

"What does that have to—"

"You are the daughter of a witch, are you not? And yet you presume to be unaware of what may happen during the witching hour?" The cat hisses. "Already, we have wasted too much time."

I stare at her, utterly confounded. Cats are prone to riddles, yes, but if a cat could laugh, I think this one would now. At me.

"There is a place," says the cat, lowering its head, eyes slit in the soft light, "called Chimera. You go there each night, and yet you have never wondered how you got there. Magic, perhaps." The cat blinks slowly. "You devour something built of dreams, and so you go to Chimera, and each night, you set the girl free."

I breathe out, feel the earth give way and crumble beneath me. She knows. I sit in silence for a very long moment while she watches me, looking very smug. There is a tug at my heart. Finally, I ask, "Something built of dreams?"

The cat sighs. "You eat a bit of rampion every day, do you not? And yet you pretend not to know why you do this, why you crave it."

Equal parts shame and anger redden my face, but the cat presses on. "You humans," she says, sharp teeth clicking together, "are so *blind*. You set the girl free in dreams, and yet you wake up each morning and live in slavery to the tree."

I cannot speak; my anger is too bright. At last, I whisper, "We have no *choice*. People need the tree."

"Yes," says the cat, blinking three times, very slowly. "People need the *tree*. They do not need the girl, and yet they get the girl and not the tree. Strange, don't you agree?"

The bones in my fingers crack as I clench my hands together. "Do you think I have not tried to imagine every possible way—"

"You are arrogant," says the cat, "and you are in love. Either one of these things alone might be overcome, but together, they make for a stubborn combination."

"I'm getting lectured by a cat," I mutter, burying my face in my hands.

"I will give you a riddle, because a riddle is a key, and you possess a lock," says the cat, words drawn out like a hiss. "But I hope, not just for your sake, but the girl's, too, that you will work at solving it. Are you listening?"

I feel myself pale and can only nod.

She nods, too, closing her green eyes. "Only the seed can find a seed, and only soil can grow a seed, and only a seed can grow new life. But only if it's planted."

And then she rises. On four stubby, wrinkled, hairless legs, the creature moves forward, staggering. She's as tall as a large dog, and when she moves toward me, every instinct urges me move away from its eyes so wide and green in the almost-darkness. But I remain on the pillow, even when she comes nose to nose with me, her soft, pink one wet against my skin.

"Chimera will find you," she whispers, and her breath smells of warm, fresh milk and honey.

I blink.

*

The village clock begins to strike the midnight hour. One...

*

The cat is gone.

*

Two...

*

The music stops with a suddenness so profound that, for a single heartbeat, I can't breathe.

*

Three...

*

The tent surrounding me vanishes. It is there, and then it is not. The lanterns suspended about the village square wink out and disappear, one by one, keeping time with the remaining bell tolls. The strange shining animals, as one, spin a final pirouette and are no longer there, and every Chimera being—including the mustached man in the silver cap—takes a bow and is gone.

The fires around the outskirts of the village square suddenly look so ordinary. The moon swings low in the western sky, a boat pointing upwards.

"They always make the best exits," I hear a village woman sigh.

I realize that I'm sitting on the ground; the pillow that was beneath me has vanished along with everything else. I stand up, dust off my skirts, press my fingers to my temple.

And I leave, pushing through the crowd, running and stumbling over the cobblestones until I hit the packed dirt of the outer streets of the village, and then I am running much more than I am stumbling, and the air burns in my lungs as I race down the road, down the path, toward the Holity.

Pine branches whip my face, my eyes. I put my arms up before me, but I do not stop, not for a moment. Not until I reach the clearing, not until I stumble a final time, fall to my knees in the forest that contains that thing which I most love and that thing which I most despise. Over me, suspended against the brilliance of a perfect map of stars, arch the Holity's branches, the platform, and Zelda.

She stands at the railing, hands gripping the rough wood, knuckles white in the moon's half-light. She stares down at me, mouth open. "I

heard..." she whispers, and then she shakes her head, says the words loud and clear and bright, "I heard the music. It was the same music from my dream. Gray, what does it mean?"

I look up at her, and I breathe out, long and slow. And I step forward.

I can't see her expression, not really. The dark plays tricks on my eyes, and her face keeps changing. The stars shine overhead, but the firelights are gone. It's late—I've wasted so much time. And I know, know absolutely, that if I don't speak now, I never will. In the dark, I'm certain, and I don't know where this courage comes from, but in the dark, the truth is easy and fast, and the words hang in the air, winking like firelights, as I speak them:

"I love you."

I'm glad that I can't see Zelda's face, because I close my eyes now and speak my deepest truth. "I love you, and I've always loved you. And I hate what I've done to you, and I know you could never love me if you knew the truth of it, but I have to tell you, Zelda. I have to." I run out of words, shocked to silence by what I'm about to do, what I'm about to destroy, but I can't stop. I can't. I have to tell her the truth. I look up at Zelda in the darkness, gaze at her shadowed face, and I sigh, and I'm saying it: "It's my fate that you have, not yours. It wasn't meant to be yours. It was mine. My mother cut it out of my heart, and she sewed it up inside of you, and I have loved you all my life, and you could never love me, because you know now." I breathe out, put my hands to my mouth. "Oh, gods. You know now."

She hasn't moved. The stars are haloed about her head, illuminating the outline of her long, long hair, and she says *nothing* for so long, I don't know what to do, until finally, finally, she exhales.

"I knew," she says. "Gray, I...always knew."

I step back, and I put a hand out, grappling for something to hold onto, but there's nothing to catch me. I waver on my own two feet, so absurdly tired.

She speaks again. "I knew it was your fate. All along. Your mother told me before she sewed it in. She never lied to me."

"Then...but..."

"I was too small to understand," she says simply. "But I had my own fate, too, didn't I, Gray? Have you ever considered that things happen the way they're meant to happen, no matter what? I believe that this fate was

not meant to be yours, that your mother did exactly as she was supposed to do by bringing me here."

I stare at her. My mouth hangs open. This—all of this—is not what I expected.

"You can't possibly say," I finally whisper, "that you're all right with this..." I wave my hand, frustrated and grasping for the right words. "This *imprisonment*."

"No," Zelda whispers, too. "I'm not all right with it."

The words linger.

"Then...then..." My hands are balled into fists; my shoulders shake as she kneels down upon the platform, pressing herself down against the boards, reaching out and down to me with her long fingers, hair draping over her face.

"I want freedom," she whispers, "as any caged thing wants freedom. But the people... I can't abandon them, their prayers, their wishes. They believe in the tree."

They believe...

I raise my eyes up to the stars, the branches like gnarled claws, darker against the blue-black of the night sky.

...in the tree.

And then she says it. In the space between us, the words hang like a moon, full and cool and beautiful: "I love you. I have. Always."

Always.

I laugh. I press my palm to my mouth, silencing myself, and I rise, then, giddy, light-headed, and I climb to the tallest root, reach up to her.

When our hands touch, there is a spark, an almost-visible, not-invisible spark.

"When I first saw you," Zelda whispers, "it was the night your mother sewed the fate to my heart. Do you remember it?"

I shake my head. "Barely." She squeezes my fingers.

"You were so afraid, you trembled. I held you close, and I told you it would be all right, and we were so small, but something began that night. I remember it," she breathes out, "as if it happened moments ago. When I first saw you, my heart grew."

"But..." I'm weeping now, tears running silently down my cheeks, against my hot face. "Why didn't you tell me? I've spent all these years *wishing...*"

Something flickers across her face in the dark. "You wanted me to be free, didn't you?"

"It's the only thing I've ever wanted," I whisper. "Besides...you."

"Don't you think that's my same wish?" she asks, and a tear descends from the corner of my eye, splashing against my nose. I dash it away it furiously with my free hand, teetering on my tiptoes. I refuse to let her fingers go.

"I must be here, but *you* don't have to be," she says. "I've wanted you to have a life that shares no part of this tree. That's what your mother wished for you when she set you free from the curse. But you are so stubborn! You stay no matter how many times I beg you to go."

"I can't leave you."

She licks her lips, watching me, and she sighs, long and heavy. "Then we're at an impasse. I love you." Her words are soft, sweet. "And you love me. And I want you to leave this place, and you refuse, and you want me to leave the tree, and I *can't*. So." Her fingers graze mine gently, gently. "It is hopeless."

"Hopeless?" I let her go. I back down from the root of the tree. I am suddenly so angry, I fold my arms over my chest, over my scars. "You are the Holity, aren't you? Isn't that all the Holity *is*?" My voice sounds sharp. "*Hope?*"

Zelda pulls back from the edge of the platform, sits up, shakes her head. Silent.

"Do you know what I dream every night, Zelda?" I whisper to her now. She makes no move, sits still beneath the starry sky. "I dream that I climb the tree," I whisper, tears stinging my eyes. "I dream that I climb up to you, and together, we cut off every lock of your hair, and then we drop down to the ground, and we *leave*. We leave everything, and there is just you and me, together. I've had that dream every night... Forever." I feel weak and small, a speck of dust in the universe. I wrap my arms around myself.

"I've dreamed it, too," Zelda whispers. "Though only once. I told you. I dreamed that we were together, and I heard that music..."

I lean against the tree, and I feel the shears press hard against my belly, and everything, in that moment, becomes a little clearer. I breathe out sharply, surprised.

"I'll...I'll be back..." I mutter, and I turn and I go, even though she calls my name. I race from the clearing, push through the pine branches, and I begin to run.

She *loves* me. She loves *me*. In my wildest wishings, my deepest dreams, I never believed this could truly happen.

And now, the memories come, nudging against my heart, and I begin to realize that my own moody, melancholy disposition had blinded me from realizing this truth long ago. Zelda had been trying to tell me she loved me for a very long time.

All of those times she asked me to leave, to go out into the world and embrace my freedom. All of the nights when she smiled at me in the dark as I read her silly poems or taught her childish songs. All of the heartbeats in which she held my hand and looked down at me with an expression I had found unreadable because I was—as the strange cat had suggested—entirely *dense*.

But it doesn't matter anymore. I was blind, but she loves me, and I love her, and that's all I ever wished for—except to set her free. And if love is there, freedom must follow. I never believed it before, but I do now. I refuse to accept hopelessness now. There is such a roar in my heart, I can't contain it, and my mind rattles with the bare bones of a plan. No, not a plan. It's only an idea. A gamble.

And a riddle.

You devour something built of dreams...

The cottage is in sight, and the garden walls.

Only the seed can find a seed, and only soil can grow a seed, and only a seed can grow new life. But only if it's planted.

I reach the garden gate in the dark.

Chimera will find you.

I fumble for my key, and when I hear the click of the lock, I step into the heady lushness, walk past the moonflowers open to the night, and drop to my knees upon the rampion bed, where I've planted so many hopes and wishes.

So many dreams.

My fingers close around the stalk of a rampion. I pull.

"What are you doing?"

I inhale deeply, breathe out long and low, and I stand up, rampion in hand, fresh-plucked and smelling of earth.

My mother stands beside the garden gate, watching me.

In the star-strewn night, I can see her eyes lit up, her hands loose at her sides. She's looking at me; she never looks at me, and there is anger in her gaze, but there's something else there, too. Sadness.

"I'm gathering rampion," I tell her bluntly. It would be pointless to lie.

She doesn't react, doesn't move a bit, but somehow she seems to grow larger, and I feel shrunken, a child again, heart bared. "It is not yours to gather," she whispers.

"It is mine to gather," I say, voice shaking, and I tuck the rampion in my pocket, holding her gaze. "I tend it. I cherish it. You never come to the garden. You can't be bothered to notice it. You're too busy."

My mother says nothing.

"I'm going to Zelda," I say, voice low, hoping my mother will move away from the gate. But she only tilts her head at me.

"Zelda is bound to the tree. You cannot unbind her." And now her voice changes, becomes something I could not have expected, have never heard before. She's pleading with me. "I wanted to save you," she says, and her presence weakens, grows small. Her shoulders sag. "I tried to save you from this fate, but I failed. You were bound up together, your fate, her fate."

I do not hate my mother.

I hate the tree.

"I tend her, too, Mother. You have no claim to that, either." My voice is softer now. None of this happened because of my mother. It happened because of the tree. But that's not right, either. It happened because the tree died, and the people made a mistake, a terrible mistake...

"If I thought she could be saved," she says quietly, bowing her head, "do you not think I would have freed her ages ago? I have read all of the books. I have tried every spell..." She presses a hand to her head. "I help everyone, Gray. But I cannot help you. And I cannot help Zelda." She sounds so old. "Do you know what it is like?" she asks me, leaning fully against the garden wall now. "Do you understand how hard it is to see my daughter in so much pain, knowing that *I* caused this pain, the very pain I wished to protect you from? I have been busy, yes, and distracted. But only because I could not stand to watch you suffer. I am, at root, a coward, Gray."

I stare at her. She's never talked like this before. There is a pang of pain within me that has nothing to do with Zelda, or the tree. My mother... All my life, I've seen her as absent, caring for everyone else but Zelda and me. In truth, I've never truly seen her before this moment.

Tonight, in the dark, it seems the truth is much easier for both of us to say. I take a step nearer.

Still...

"You took a child," I whisper.

She's shaking her head. "I traded for a child," she says hastily. "It was an arrangement, a bargain. It was not right, but... I needed something for the fate, a living container. I never meant... I had to... I never meant to hurt anyone." She sighs. "And I am very sorry that I have. I will not ask you to forgive me for it. I don't have that right."

Can I forgive her? Is it up to *me* to forgive her? I remember what Zelda said, about how she had always known, how she believed this is the course our lives were always meant to take.

I move toward my mother in the dark. My mother, the witch, who was never truly wicked, who I never hated, who had her own scars to bear, as deep as mine.

"I'm going to try to free her," I whisper, and my mother stares at me. A single tear traces down her cheek. She nods so subtly before stepping aside, and then I move past her, out into the darkness, the lush warmth of the garden giving way to the cool of the night.

I glance over my shoulder, and beneath the glitter of stars overhead, my mother watches me at the gate, then turns away, steps into her garden for the first time in a very long time.

I swipe tears from my eyes, and I *run*.

The trees move around me, shadows rushing past me. Soon, sooner than seems possible, I am in the clearing, and Zelda stands at the edge of the platform, belly pressed against the rough wooden railing, her impossible hair streaming upward and down.

In the starlight, everything is muted and blue and silver, and when I come to stand in the center of the clearing, my breath rushing through my mouth, I stare up at Zelda, transfixed.

The world slows. I know that *this* moment is the one I've waited for...always.

"What do you have?" asks Zelda, and her voice breaks on the last word. I clear my throat, hold up the rampion, little roots dangling from my fist.

"Remember," I say. "You ate some the night before you dreamed...that dream."

"You mean—"

"It's the rampion. I finally pieced it together. The cat said I'd been blind, and I had been. I never realized..."

"Gray, what cat—"

"It's not important." I show her the rampion again. "I picked this from my mother's garden. I eat it every night. And every night, I dream of us. It affects dreams, makes dreams...magical. I think we should eat the rampion together, Zelda."

She laughs a little, squints down at me. "Well...why not?" She sinks to her knees on the platform, near the pulley for the basket. Her eyes gleam in the moonlight. "The night feels strange, Gray," she whispers then.

I look up at the imposing tower of the tree. How very far away the platform seems at this moment. I gaze at the knots and ridges of bark that I've studied so many times before, secretly building a ladder in my mind's eye...

And then I step up onto the root.

When I place my hand upon the tree, upon that first ridge of bark, Zelda breathes out hard.

"Gray, what—"

My right foot finds the first sturdy knot, and after that, the climb progresses effortlessly. It feels like the path to the Holity. I've traced this way hundreds of times, not physically but in my daydreams, and my feet and hands know what to do as if by instinct.

When I reach the edge of the platform, I'm no longer breathing hard, and when I ease my knee over the edge of the platform, crawl under the railing and crouch on the edge, I wait, eyes wide in the darkness. Stunned. Zelda's stunned, too, and she has her hands over her mouth.

What did we think would happen? It is forbidden for someone without the veined tree upon their chest to step foot on the platform. The Holity is sacred, and any trespass is profane.

But this is not profane.

And, I realize, there is a ghost of a tree marked upon me. Perhaps that's enough.

I stand, and I teeter. I stare at Zelda for a long moment, and it's not me who moves first, but Zelda. She crosses the space between us in a heartbeat, and she throws her arms about me, and—just like in the dream, almost *exactly* like in the dream—she's kissing me.

She's so warm. It takes a long moment for my brain to catch up to my body, which already has its arms wrapped around her tightly, pressing against her long length as if we were always meant to be entwined, each of our curves fitting together. She's soft, soft as dove feathers or dandelion tufts. Her mouth, her smile presses against my own. She breaks away when I do, and I'm ducking my head, looking down, because I'm feeling so much, there's no place to put it all, but Zelda firmly presses a finger under my chin, and then we're nose to nose, eye to eye, taking one another in.

"You're here," she whispers, the words breaking.

"I'm here."

I'm finally here.

I wrap my arms so tightly about her that I'm afraid I'll squeeze the breath from her, but she doesn't seem to mind, pillowing her head on my shoulder, wrapping her arms about me, too. I kiss her. I kiss her, and it's so big and beautiful, so like the dreams, but so much more than the dreams. It's like nothing I could ever have imagined, and that's all right. If I could, I would live forever in this moment. But no one can live in a moment, and time moves on.

We part, and I look down at her, anxious, worried. So many emotions move across her face, but her expression settles on pain, finally, and Zelda is crossing her arms, looking down at the earth far, far below.

“What are we going to do, Gray?” she asks me. There’s fear in her voice.

I crouch on the platform, motion for her to come beside me. She kneels down, and we’re knee to knee when I remove the rampion from my pocket, hand Zelda the first root.

“Please eat this,” I whisper. She looks doubtful, but I press the vegetable into her hands, wiping dirt away from it. “Please,” I say, and she looks up at me, nods once, and then she’s eating it. I eat mine, too, swallowing the grit of the dirt.

I toss the stalks down to the earth. We both watch them fall.

“What’s going to happen?” Zelda whispers.

“I was given a riddle.” I clasp her hands, holding them tightly. “I think I know what we need to do. To set you free.”

“Oh... Is it possible, Gray?” Her words are so small. “I’m afraid to hope...” Her eyes are as round as the moon. “Freedom?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” I tell her, closing my eyes to her eager face. I can’t bear it. I can’t. “But we’re going to try, all right? We have to try, and we have to try together.”

She gazes up at the stars. “We only have a few more hours of night.” Her hair shushes and sighs, pulled tight upon some of the branches, loosened on some others. I reach up, thread my fingers through a strand of it, hold the silken weight of it in my palm. Her hair, her scent, is everywhere. *She* is everywhere, all around me.

We sit, knee to knee, hand in hand, in this bower built of dead branches and strands of mane, and it’s a strange house in which to find oneself, but I’m here and now, the platform creaking in the slight breeze, boards shifting beneath me, complaining that they were never meant to hold up two people.

It’s her hands in mine that anchor me. The only realness of this moment is the way her head tilts in the darkness, the way she leans forward, smiling a little, though she still looks worried. She brushes a little dirt from the corner of my mouth, and then she kisses me again.

Her hand at the back of my neck is light, and I sigh, because there’s too much hope in my heart, hope that’s pain, bound on all sides by the

possibility of failure. This has gone on for centuries, *this*, a person containing the spirit of a tree, a spirit too large for any human to be burdened with. Sacredness and profanity and prayers and wishes: they're all held together by the broken limbs of this dead tree, raking the night sky with its blackened branches. We are so small, the two of us, The tree and the sky are so large and grand. We could fail so easily, fall before we've begun to rise.

We lay down next to one another, bodies pressed together, hands entwined. I close my eyes to the rush of starlight overhead, listen only to the constancy of Zelda's breath, in and out, cherish the warmth of her hands in mine, the way her forehead feels against my own. I close my eyes, and I hold close this one moment of my life, this moment, which—no matter what happens next—I will have forevermore.

At least we have this.

At least...

*

I open my eyes.

Zelda isn't here.

It's a gut-wrenching thing, opening my eyes to find myself lying alone, completely *alone*, when—a heartbeat before—she was beside me, pressed against me. My body feels cold without her warmth.

I stumble to my feet, scream her name. "*Zelda!*" The stars hang silent overhead, and that's when I feel the earth give way beneath my feet.

No. Not earth. I'm standing on...sand.

Am I dreaming?

My feet sink further into the silver sand as I try to gain balance, but I slip to the side, anyway. I scramble upwards—I'm on the slope of a hill—and then I climb to the top on my hands and knees. I stand up and open my mouth to yell Zelda's name again.

I am silenced by the click-clack-whir of a familiar melody.

There is no moon on the horizon. There are no trees, no forest. Sand stretches far away in all directions. And down in a dip of the sand hills and valleys, there are lights. Flickering, colorful lights.

The Not-There Fair.

The music wafts out of the twinkling tents. I draw my arms about myself; I'm barely holding myself up. My heart is thundering faster and faster, so fast that I feel as if my ribs might crack.

Chimera will find you.

Am I dreaming?

This doesn't feel like a dream, not even the most convincing of dreams. This feels real. I hold up my hands, look down at my palms, at the lines my mother once told me meant I would live a happy life.

In the half-darkness, I walk down the side of the hill, slipping and sliding toward the Not-There Fair with its myriad starry tents. And its music.

The man with the mustache and the moon-spangled cap lounges on his purple box at the edge of the circle. I regard him warily, then glance about. There are animals and people here, as there were at Red Spring, but they do not look the same as they did before. They are larger, even *more* beautiful, but a bit frightening.

The strutting peacocks' feathers glow, haloed with a haze of a shimmering blue-green. The alicorn is huge, fierce, proud. The woman on his back lounges as if upon a featherbed, and her eyes send out sparks of red when she blinks.

The music is blaring, pervasive, but the mustached man notices me. He winks as I stalk up to him, and I am suddenly furious.

"Where am I?" I demand. "What have you done to me?"

"What have you done to yourself?" he counters. "*Who* ate the rampion?" When I pale and do not answer, he laughs at me. "When you take advice from a cat, there are always consequences." He points across the circle of tents to the only one with a closed flap.

My stomach flutters, but I bolster my courage, cross the circle. Beasts and performing people watch me from the shadows. A bear with a shaggy white pelt that reflects bluely beneath the stars lumbers aside to let me pass.

And then I am inside the tent; the flap *shushes* closed behind me.

"So, you came," says the cat, rising and stretching lazily.

She is the same creature from the fair—I know she is—but she is neither hairless here, nor wrinkled. She's silver, and she's shining—a silver lioness as tall as I am, even seated on her haunches. Though she looks nothing like the cat, I would recognize her anywhere.

“How—” I begin, but the lioness shakes her head, laughs a throaty roar of a laugh.

“You do not have much time. You must listen very closely,” she admonishes me. “There are only a few hours of nightlight left. Do you understand?”

“I don't understand any of this! What—”

She jumps forward, and then she is nose to nose with me. Her leap was so sudden and smooth, it's as if time was somehow wrinkled and is suddenly snapped straight.

I hold my breath.

“If you would save your precious girl, if you would right the wrongs of peoples past, you must acknowledge that you have very little time in which to do so, and—in all probability—you will fail. But,” she hisses, and it's a little more purr than hiss, “I'm still betting on you, so there you are.”

“There I am,” I repeat, wholly confused.

“Find the tree,” she whispers, and then she blinks.

*

I stand in a valley of sand. Tents, lioness, the white bear and the mustached man...all are gone.

“Naturally,” I mutter, dusting sand from my palms.

There is sand, and sand, and more sand. Sand everywhere. Stars overhead. I touch the shears in my belt, nervous, and I decide that I will climb to the highest spot that I can find and survey the land again. My heart pulses against my bones, and I feel the certainty of time slipping away from me, but I have no set quest, no map.

Find the tree.

The Holity? It's here? In the middle of a nothingness of sand? How can I possibly find it, and how much time, *exactly*, do I have? And as I lunge up the mound of sand, slipping back two steps for every one, I rest for a long moment, listening to the blood pound through my body, closing my eyes to the bright silver of this strange desert.

Despair comes then, crawling toward me.

I feel it first. And then I open my eyes, and I see it.

I know Despair on sight. It looks a little like a dog made of broken bones, sliming toward me on its belly, eyes wide and wild in the dark, teeth

bared.

“You will never find it,” it whispers to me, even as I back away from it, sliding down the hill, back toward the valley. I close my eyes and open them, and the dog's on my other side, its arms and hands disturbingly humanlike. It snakes toward me, reaching out to grab the front of my shirt. I yelp. It drags me forward, eyes rolling in the back of its head, pink tongue snaking through its fangs to lick its black lips.

“Lie here and wait for the sunrise,” it whispers in my ear, warm saliva flicking out at me as I struggle to disentangle its nails from my tunic. “You'll never find anything in the dark.”

“Let go of me,” I mutter, and then I shove hard against its chest. The claws unhook from my shirt, and Despair tumbles halfway down the hill before it rights itself, eyes glowing black as it looks up at me, mouth turning up into a terrible, toothy smile.

It crawls after me so quickly, I have no choice but to try to run up the hill—an impossibility—or take out the shears.

I take out the shears. And I stab at the air, eyes closed, and I feel the blades sink into something soft.

My stomach lurches.

I open my eyes, and my mouth falls open.

Where there once was one, there now are three. Two more broken dogs crawl up the side of the hill toward me. As I look down and into the valley, I see twenty more of them advancing—no, fifty. Now, a hundred. My heart rises to my throat as I point the shears at the original dog, even as a writhing mass of shadow and teeth rises from the valley floor toward me. They're keening, and their wails sounds a little like the Chimera music, all clicks and whirs. But there is nothing beautiful in this sound. It's screeching and harsh, and it makes my head throb.

I keep the shears pointed at the beast, but I am sinking down in the sand, and I know that there are too many of them. They crawl on top and over one another to get closer to me, and the first one says in a whisper so soft, it's like a lullaby, “Lie down and go to sleep.”

I hook the shears in my belt, and I turn and begin to climb. I do not look over my shoulder, even when I feel the heat of breath against my back.

In a heartbeat, there is no hill. The sand is flat, where an almost cliff-face had loomed over me before. Now I dare to glance behind me, breathing so hard that I can scarcely lift my head.

The dogs are gone.

I sink to my knees, press the heels of my hands to my eyes. If I live to be a thousand, I will never be able to forget the black eyes rolling back, the gleam of grinning canine mouths.

I stand.

Sand goes on forever in all directions but one. In that direction, to my right, hanging below one of the brightest shining stars, is a shadow against the glimmer of silver. It's the only difference in a sea of sameness, so I turn my nose toward it.

I walk for a long while. I decide that I hate sand. This place is one of the most beautiful I've ever seen, but there is sand clinging to every inch of my body, caught in every crevice and joint. I think I will go mad from the pervasive itchiness. I scratch a little, absentmindedly, and pause, crunching sand between my teeth. I try to get my bearings as I look up at the stars, but the constellations are like none I have ever seen.

A whisper. I hear it, and every hair on my arms stands upright. I look in the direction I've been walking, then behind me.

Where there was nothing before, nothing but sand stretching away into oblivion, now there is a tower. It stands sentinel-like, pointing like a finger toward the heavens. The white of its stone marks it stark against the velvet of the night sky.

A tower. I shiver, rubbing a hand against my left shoulder. How often did I imagine the tree as an unscalable tower that kept Zelda out of my reach? I walk toward the tall structure as if bewitched, the whispering, sighing sound growing louder with each step that I take.

One step, my feet are on the silver sand that glows in the starlight. The next, they pass into complete darkness, marching into the tower's shadow. I look up.

There is a single, tall window below the faraway roof, peaked at the top. In the window sits a shape that looks remarkably personlike, but it is so far away, and my eyes have been playing tricks on me. Perhaps Chimera has been playing tricks on me, too. I rub at my eyes, peer up at the window again, wary of mirages. I could have sworn...

"Gray," Zelda whispers, and it's as if she's standing beside me, lips against the skin of my neck. But she's not with me on the ground.

Zelda's in the window of the tower.

I stare up at her, transfixed. She is combing and braiding her long, long hair.

It's *her*.

"Zelda!" I shout up at her, heart bouncing up, suddenly so jubilant, I have no words. But I find some quickly. "Zelda, are you all right?"

"I'm all right! Are you?" she shouts down, and I'm nodding, pressing my hands to my mouth, because I've found her. I've *found* her.

"Just...just wait a minute, all right?" I could weep with relief, but I can't. We haven't found the tree yet, and the lioness said that was important. And she said that there was no time to spare.

I run around the perimeter of the tower, stop when I reach the beginning of the shadow again. There is no door.

"There's no way out!" Zelda calls down to me, almost apologetic. I shake my head, shade my eyes against the starshine.

"There must be!" I shout back up, and then I stare up and up and up at her mane. I laugh despite myself. I've found the way. "Zelda!" I shout, cupping my hands around my mouth. "Zelda, let down your hair!"

She does not move for a moment. But then it comes, down and down and down it falls, neatly braided together, beautifully braided together. Her hair is long enough to reach the foot of the tower. The end of the braid rests in the silver sand.

I climb.

I wince each time I pull myself up, aware that, no matter how smoothly I try to advance, I'm hurting her, must be hurting her. And it is not so very easy to climb a tower on a rope of hair. My feet scrabble against the slick-smooth stones, and I rest for a moment, letting my legs dangle. I look down once, which was most certainly a mistake, because down and down and down lies the sand, and it seems a very long way to fall. A painfully long way, should my arms fail me. I don't think any magic could save me in this dreamlike place.

"You're close, Gray," Zelda whispers, sounding strained, and her voice gives me strength. I drag myself up the last few feet until my fingertips find the stone edge of the window, and I'm pulling myself up and over and in. And I'm in the tower, and I'm collapsing into Zelda's arms.

She unhooks her hair from a spike in the wall, and we hold one another for a very long time. I kiss her. I kiss her eyes and her mouth and her nose and her cheeks, and I cradle her against me, my heart pounding

like wild music. "I closed my eyes, just for a moment, and you were gone," I tell her, and she's nodding, because of course I was gone, too, and we lie together for a long moment, and I know that time is running out, but I need the reassurance of her body against mine, the knowledge that she is here, that she is real. If any of this is real, I know that she is.

"We have to find the tree," I whisper.

We disentangle, and we're standing, Zelda nervously threading her fingers through her braid while I look about the tiny, cramped space within the tower.

"How can we get down?" she asks, and I stare at her. I stare at her braid. We both do.

"Yes," she says.

I take the shears from my belt, and I hand them to her, wordless. She turns them in her hands, the silver flashing in the starlight.

There is feral determination in her eyes, on her face, and her mouth turns up at the corners as she turns the braid over her shoulder to dangle down and upon her left breast, over her heart. And then she grabs a sizeable chunk of her mane and opens the shears with a great *snap*.

"Free," is what I hear her whisper then, and the first lock of hair falls away from her. I catch it as she saws through her braid, eyes sparkling with light in the darkness. I hold the braid, the heavy, brown braid, and she hands me back my shears, and then she's looping the hair over the spike and around and around the corner of a bed in the center of the room, tying it off.

"Come on," she whispers, swinging her legs out of the window, into the open air. She's smiling, and her hair curls up and around her ears as my dream promised me it would. I reach out and touch the soft curls, smiling, too.

She grips the braid, and she begins to climb down.

Climbing down is no easier than climbing up, but at last, we're standing on our own two feet again. We embrace each other tightly, and I touch Zelda's curls, wondering.

"You're beautiful," I tell her then, "with short hair or long hair. But if I had to choose, I think I might prefer it short..." I trail off in the dark, and then we're both laughing. It doesn't matter how strange it all is, this place, this moment. We laugh for a heartbeat, and we clasp hands as Zelda tests the shifting sand beneath her feet.

We choose a direction and begin to walk—back the way I came, back toward the only changing thing on the horizon: the large shadow there.

I turn to look over my shoulder once. The tower is gone. I am beginning to expect such things from Chimera.

As we move forward, the landscape begins to blur around us. The faster we walk, the faster the sand speeds past, and the shadow drags closer and closer until we both pause for a moment, because we are near enough to make out what the shadow is.

It's not a shadow at all.

"Trees," says Zelda in the same moment that I whisper, "A forest."

We run together.

As the forest looms closer, my belly turns over, uncertain. The trees darken the starry heavens, and the pointed caps of pines, the domed heads of oaks look somehow off, odd. When we're right below the branches' sheltering arms, when the ground hardens beneath our feet to the solidity of earth, I look up and reach out and press my hands against the bark.

It is not bark.

I take a step backward, skin crawling. Zelda asks me, "What is it?" and she reaches forward, too. But she doesn't recoil.

"Hair," she whispers, gliding her hand over the pine tree's trunk. It's made entirely of hair. Hair arcs in the shape of branches, draping around us. There's hair in every shade of brown, of black, of gray and white and blonde and red. I shudder, slinking away from the trees until I'm standing out beneath the starlight again.

Zelda remains under the trees, though, her face half-hidden by shadows. She turns, holds out a hand to me.

"Gray," she whispers, and there is urgency in her voice.

I know that time is running out, but...a forest made of hair? It's as if every nightmare I possessed has crept out of my mind, slithered out through my ears, and has come alive here, in this desert. I bite my lip, eye the hair branches with unmistakable disgust, and then I sigh, long and low, as I clasp Zelda's hand and step beneath the trees again.

We don't run through the forest. We walk, and walk slowly, because there are exposed roots everywhere, and they are made of hair, and they snag on our shoes. I swear that I see one move, undulate. And then, where there was no root before, a root appears, and I trip, but Zelda catches me.

I don't tell Zelda about the Despair creatures or this world's Not-There Fair. Honestly, I am too anxious to speak. I try not to imagine that any creatures lurk within the hairy treetops, but my shoulder blades prick. This isn't a normal forest full of birds and chipmunks and deer. Anything could be out there, up there. Anything...

I gasp when a shadow slinks through the trunks of hair just ahead of us. I stop, breathing faster, blood pounding through me. Zelda sees it, too, and as she tightens her hold on my hand.

"What is it?" she whispers. I shake my head. I saw something small and dark, and I don't know, don't know... But then I do know, because there is quick movement, and the shadowed creature steps into view.

It is little and copper-colored beneath the silvery light of the stars that shines in shafts through the knotted branches of the trees. A little fox, by the looks of her, very sleek and pretty, much prettier than the scraggly beasts that live in the forest at home. She stands so still, one front paw poised in the air, watching us.

"You have come far," she says pertly then, sitting down, her front paws even and perfectly placed. "But farther still you must go. You must find the tree before morning, and I have been asked to aid you in this." With a wink and a jump, the fox leaps up. "You are on the right track, but not everything is as it seems in Chimera."

"I noticed..." I mutter, but the fox bounds away into the shadows.

"That was charming," says Zelda, squeezing my arm gently as we walk along. I promise myself, in that moment, that I will never, ever tell her about the dogs of Despair.

We follow the fox's path, and it looks so familiar, unnervingly so. I freeze when we come in sight of the cottage, freeze because my stomach has fallen away, and I can't breathe in that simple, single moment because it came up too fast, too quickly, Chimera moving around us, and perhaps through us.

Ahead of us is my mother's cottage. It is so like, and then not at all like, the place I call home. I know this is not our cottage—I *know* that—I know that, but it is difficult to remember, because there, in the doorway, nose to the wind, stands my mother.

But...no. That isn't the witch Momma Bone in the doorway, chin upturned to the night sky.

It is something else entirely.

The clicking, whirring, clacking music surrounds us as she turns, as her head cocks to the side, birdlike and quick in the darkness.

“Mother,” I whisper, forgetting that this is not my mother.

She bounds toward Zelda. There are massive silver shears in her hand; they wink and click in the cold starlight. The not-Mother shambles beneath a hundred cloaks and shawls and skirts, head bent and stooped. She doesn’t look much like the woman who birthed me, raised me, my mother, the mother I do not hate. When I step in front of Zelda, when I stand between Zelda and the witch, I look at the woman’s face. She does not look like my mother one bit.

She is alive, and she is tall, and she has wavy gray hair and flashing eyes, but there is a hollow light within them. She still holds the shears aloft, but when I step in front of Zelda, the witch pauses as if struck.

I am only a witch’s daughter. I know very little magic. But it doesn’t matter. Perhaps it never has. I reach up, and I—slowly, patiently—take the shears from her hand, and before my eyes, the woman crumples and falls until she is only a lump of cloaks and skirts, nothing more. The enormous shears, glittering wickedly in my grasp, I leave on top of the pile of cloth, and I turn away.

That wasn’t my mother; I feel no sense of loss. My real mother tried to save me; she did her best; she is not wicked.

I do not hate her.

I can feel time turning, running down, but I’m compelled to visit the garden. I need to see it. The key about my neck fits into the gate lock smoothly, and as it turns and clicks, the gate swings open. I cast my eyes about sadly. There is nothing here but turned-over earth. Nothing growing. Absolutely nothing.

I step away from the shadow of the cottage that is not my cottage, I thread my fingers with Zelda’s, and we step away from the pile of cloth that was the shadow witch, and we walk quickly down the long, familiar path, between the trunks made of hair, toward the clearing.

We hear the music before we see the tree, the Chimera music starting out soft and slow and small. It makes my hair stand on end, makes me pause and look all around me, because the music heralds strangeness. But there is nothing here but the trees of hair, branches dangling limp or blown about by small puffs of wind. It is a quiet night, a night for deep dreaming,

and there is no sand beneath our feet, only hard-packed dirt, but even the dirt is the cool color of silver.

We move forward step by step, holding hands, and then we are in the clearing, racing across the clearing, and the tree is there. It's *there*, but it is not like the tree that Zelda gave her life to, the tree that cursed us both.

The tree before us is not at all like the Holity. And it is not made of hair.

It is alive, a living tree. A massive, beautiful, *holy* tree. What I gather, in a starbright instant, is that this is the Holity which once had been.

It is so very tall. I feel my strength leave me, seep out through my toes, and I lower myself to my knees on the silver earth. I gaze up at the graceful branches cupping the starshine, holding up the sky. Zelda—still standing, face somber—tugs at my collar, and I shake my head, rise up, and together, *together*, we stand before the tree.

All I can do, for a very long, jagged moment, is stare at the beauty of it, entranced. But Zelda is whispering something in my ear, something that makes me go cold all over.

“What are we supposed to do?”

I don't know.

The cat said, *Only the seed can find a seed, and only soil can grow a seed, and only a seed can grow new life. But only if it's planted.*

But the fox said, *Not everything is as it seems.*

“We...we need a seed,” I say slowly, hesitantly, casting my eyes desperately over the tree. A seed comes from a fruit...but the Holity bears no fruit. We wander around the roots, circle the tree, but there is no fruit, no seed in sight.

I kneel down again, put my head in my hands. *I don't know what to do.* We've come all this way, and I was given a riddle, and I can't make sense of it, and I don't know how much time we have left, but surely we're running low on nightlight. Surely it's almost time, almost time to go back to Red Spring, and if we go back now, it will be to a life of separation, of melancholy, of despair.

Despair.

I can't go back to that. I can't give in to it. Not ever again. Zelda kneels beside me, rests her head on my shoulder. I know she feels this urgency, too. Her hands are shaking in her lap.

I look up at the tree again. It towers, gargantuan, endless dark branches against the brighter night sky. The leaves are lush and thick, but as I stare up, I spy something twinkling on a faraway branch. I stand, squinting, and I see it better now: something flashing bright in the sky, on the highest branch of the Holity.

"Is that it?" I whisper and point, and Zelda is standing, too, looking up and up.

"I'm not sure," she says, and her voice sounds strange, thin. "What is that? I think it's just a star, Gray."

I shake my head, take the shears from my belt, rub my hands together. "I'll climb up," I say resolutely. "I'll get it, drop it down to you. It must be the seed, Zelda." I gesture to the fruitless tree. "There's nothing else."

"I don't know," she tells me, taking a step backward and crossing her arms over her middle. "What if you fall?"

"This must be it." I press a hand against the bark. It's sharp enough to slice, but I reach for a knot in the wood, swallow hard and prepare to climb.

But I turn to look at Zelda one last time, and that's when I know something is terribly wrong, because she's sitting again, leaning a little to the side, one hand clamped over her heart. Her eyes are closed, and her face has no color.

I race to her, gather her into my arms as she whispers my name, "Gray, Gray," and she's shaking, shaking as the leaves on the Holity are shaking now, and her hand is practically clawing at the skin over her heart. Her eyes are wide, her mouth open in a little O. "Gray...it *hurts*."

"What is it? What hurts? Did you fall, trip?" I feel desperate, panicked, as her full weight leans against me. I ease her down to the ground, and she curls up on her side, her hand still scratching at her chest. I worry that she's breaking the skin, bruising herself.

"Gray, it's *burning*."

"I don't understand. *What* is burning?"

"The tree!" she wails. "The fate! It wants it back. It wants..." Her eyes roll back in her head, and her mouth goes slack.

"No, no, no," I whisper, sobbing as I peel back the collar of her shift. The black outline of the tree, the veins, are surrounded with scratches, swollen and throbbing, and there is a hot pulsing starburst of red beneath her skin, where her heart should be.

Where the fate is sewn.

My fate.

Mechanically, I reach for the shears at my belt. I feel cold, anguished, but certain. I think I finally understand. But the gaps in my magical knowledge mock me, shaming me. My mother had cast spells of protection upon Zelda and me when she cut us open, when she removed the fate from me, when she sewed it into her. I know nothing of these spells. They require great magic, magic I've never learned, magic I might not even *possess*.

I cry out, cover my mouth with my hands, close my eyes. Faintly, from very far away, I can make out the uneven melody of the music that drew us here, to Chimera.

"Gray, it's killing me," Zelda whispers, her voice dull.

I open my eyes and look at her, and my vision is suddenly so clear, I feel like I can see through her, past her skin pale as the moon, deeper than the black veins throbbing in time to the beat of my heart. I can see the fate, my fate, fluttering wildly against her ribs. It's beating on her bones.

It wants to be set free.

And just like that, I know what to do.

I take out the shears and cut open the top of Zelda's hair with two precise clicks, and the stars seem to rise, lighting up the forest of hair, illuminating the black tree scrawled upon Zelda's chest, brightening the holy tree that arches overhead with glossy, trembling leaves... I breathe out.

And I cut out Zelda's fate.

My fate.

Our fate.

She doesn't cry out, makes no sound at all. I watch her chest rise and fall and, with a sharp intake of air, remember to breathe myself.

The fate alights on a root nearby, waits patiently as I remove a needle from the witch's sack in my pocket. I pluck a long, sturdy strand of hair from a pine, and I sew up the gash over Zelda's heart. My stitches are small but strong.

When it is done, when Zelda lays half on the ground, half on my lap, so still and quiet, with a strange look of peace upon her face, I glance at the fate, hold out a hand to it. It flies slowly, bobbing like a young bird unused to flight. It weighs nothing upon my fingertip. I watch as it opens and closes, opens and closes its dusty gray wings.

I kiss Zelda's forehead, squeeze her hand tightly as I close my eyes.

*

Birdsong. Everywhere. Supreme silence erupts into cacophony in a heartbeat, and I know I am no longer in Chimera. I open my eyes, sit up. Zelda and I lie together upon the platform in the Holity. There is light, but no warm light, not yet. There is still a cool sprinkling of stars in the west.

But it is almost morning.

Though the shears are still hooked in my belt, though Zelda's tunic is whole, uncut, I peer toward her breastbone, flushing in the crisp air, and I see no stitches, no scratches, no harm. No tree of black veins, either. Where it once was, only a translucent tree of scars remains, twin to my own scars.

I open my left fist and find my fate. It is small and thin and light, and it no longer moves, as it did in Chimera. I hold it up to my face, peer at it curiously as Zelda sits up beside me, stretches, tugging at her long, tangled hair.

And we stare at one another in that moment, *realizing*. We are back. We have the seed...I think. I hope.

I kiss her. I reach forward, and I kiss her quickly, and then I'm pressing my shears into her hands, and I gently place my fate in my skirt pocket, and I'm swinging over the side of the platform, scrabbling for handholds in the bark of the Holity. The tree is dead here, dead once more, but as I climb down, straining for footholds, I remember what it looked like, what it felt like in Chimera, how beautiful, how truly holy it was.

I no longer hate it. There's no hate left within me. That dark knot of feeling is gone entirely, as if it were plucked straight from my breast.

The sun is coming. I feel it nudging at the edge of the horizon, and as my feet find the forest floor, I kneel down, and I take out the motionless fate, and I press it into the earth, beside the roots of the tree.

The first tendril of green comes up and out of the dirt the moment that the first strand of hair falls from overhead.

I hear the snipping of the shears, marvel at the nut-brown locks raining down around me as the tree slowly, slowly begins to transform. I back away as the dirt moves, as the growing thing, growing fast and strong from the seed of fate, becomes thicker and more robust—a trunk of its own right that turns and twines around the skeleton of the old tree. No—not just around, but *in*, too, because the old bark of the Holity is changing color, from black to a living brown, and the branches overhead begin to move and

stretch and straighten, and the hair falls, and the tree *grows*, and I hear a little sound, a cry, a jubilant one, and I look up at Zelda, who points the shears to the sky as the last bit of her hair descends down, and she laughs. She tosses the shears onto the platform bed, even as it heaves and bucks beneath her, the boards shifting as the branches do. Soon, the platform will be crushed beneath the new growth.

I stand on the tallest root, and Zelda runs to the edge of the platform, begins to climb down the tree, even as the trunk grows wider and taller—immeasurably tall.

Zelda drops to the root, and I help her up; both of us dash away from the surging earth around the base of the Holity. Even the roots are moving now, changing, growing. We run carefully to avoid tripping on them.

At the edge of the clearing, Zelda throws her arms around my shoulders, and she's laughing but crying, too. Both of us are. I wrap my arms tight and snug about her waist, and I'm kissing her, I'm kissing her fiercely and sweetly and like every kiss I ever dared to dream of. And when we draw apart from one another, I hear a great groan of trunk as the Holity stops growing, stops healing, stops becoming. And simply is. Whole. Alive. Well.

"We had the seed all along," I tell Zelda then, awed. "We always had it."

"Come on!" she calls, pulling at my arm. Together, we race down the forest path, past the winding line of pilgrims, towards the cottage and the garden and my mother and the village and the road and freedom.

We do not look back, not even once.

FIN

Crumbs

A Lesbian Hansel and Gretel

by Elora Bishop

Momma's not back yet. Han says it doesn't mean anything--she's been late coming back before--but my gut's churning. Something doesn't feel right. Just because the Ragers haven't come this far into the Heap before doesn't mean they never will.

They could be outside. Right now.

I close my eyes real tight, curl up tighter. My favorite place anywhere is on my parents' bed, because it's in the far corner of the room, and if anything ever came after me through the door, at least I'd have a corner to hide in. Han says that I think too much about bad things: the Ragers, the sickness, What Could Happen. He's right. Doesn't mean I stop thinking about them, though.

Daddy's scavenging where the colored metal is. That's good. I don't have to worry about him, 'cause he's down in a valley in the Heap, and the Ragers don't have enough patience to climb all the way up the hills and then down and in for just one person. They're not that easy to predict, but I've never seen them go to too much trouble. They like flat surfaces. They can move faster on flat surfaces.

The door clicks open, and then there's Momma, and I vault across the space between us in a heartbeat, burying my face in her shoulder, sobbing much harder than a grown woman should sob. And I *am* a grown woman now, as Momma reminds me, smoothing my messy hair back. Her hair is all gray now. I remember when it was as black as a night sky.

Han rolls his eyes from his seat at the table. "I told her you were fine," he mutters, but Momma gives him a warning look. She reminds him I'm *fragile*, and I rub at my eyes. It's not like I *like* being fragile. I wish I didn't care. Sometimes I think Han doesn't care, but then he surprises me.

I hate him today. But the hate never lasts too long.

"Shush, sweetheart," Momma says to me, slinging her bag off her shoulder, putting out an arm to Han. He unfolds his gawky legs, strides over and wraps her in a big bear hug.

"Now, I have some news," Momma says, and my gut clenches up again.

"Greta, you sit over there. Han, you over there." She gestures to our places at the old scavenged table. Han scuffs a fingernail on the surface as

he sits down. I fold my hands in front of me, thinking over the thousand terrible things that Momma might say now.

Daddy comes through the door then, face haggard and weary. He hangs up his hat on the peg, shrugs out of his coat, the threadbare thing falling away. Like Momma, Daddy's hair is gray now, too.

"Something happened today," says Momma when we're all around the table, Han, Momma, me, Daddy, across and alongside each other, just like we always sit. Usually I feel okay, like I can breathe, when we're together like this, but all I'm feeling now is that my heart is beating too fast--*thump, thump, thump*--because Momma said that something happened today, and that's never a good way to start a story around here.

"Anyway," she says, looking down at her hands, all tired-like, "I was digging through the Two-Top Heap way out there, looking for some more of those beet cans we found there once—you remember—and...some people came through."

"People!" It's worse than I imagined. "You didn't talk to them, Momma," I start, horror making my words thick.

She won't look at me. 'Cause of course she talked to them.

I gasp for air.

"What was I going to do, Greta, shoot them?" she asks calmly, even though my whole world is swimming away in fast, uneven strokes.

"It'd be better than talking," I spit out real fast, but my brother is shaking his head, and Daddy won't look at me, either.

"We don't shoot anyone," says Daddy in that quiet voice he has. "We only shoot Ragers."

"They could have been infected," I hiss, panicking now. "Did you check? Did you see if--"

"Let me finish," mutters Momma, and I'm kneading at my eyes, seeing shapes and colors as I roll my fingers hard over my skin.

"They weren't infected," says Momma firmly. "I know all the signs, Greta Jane, and they had none of 'em. Who taught you the signs, girl?"

"You did," I say, but not loud enough, and she makes me repeat it. My heart won't calm its fluttering.

"None of 'em had the signs," she says again, glaring at me. "And they had a car. And they had room..." She trails off, and now she's the one pushing a fingernail over the tabletop. She won't meet my eyes, and Han and I exchange a glance.

"What are you saying, Momma?" And I ask it without a trace of anger, because I'm not angry anymore. I'm afraid.

"We're going to go with 'em, Daddy and me. At first light," she says, and she says it so hard, I know there's no way to sway her. I've seen her hard like this before. When the Ragers got Mary, she turned to stone. She didn't go inward, not like some of the mothers did back then. She just got ferocious, even more protective of Han and me. I don't really remember Mary anymore. I was too little, and she was even smaller than I was. But I remember what losing her did to Momma.

Momma's still talking, but I can't really make sense of the words. "We'll bring people back. We'll get you all safe, you'll see," she's saying, and I know she's trying to sound comforting, but I don't hear comfort. I hear that my life is changing.

"Momma, are you serious?" asks Han, and he's not sarcastic this time, just wondering-like. Momma nods, and Daddy does, too.

"We might not get a chance like this again," she says, and she's saying it to me, voice pleading, eyes wet and wide. I bite my lip so hard, bite the familiar groove where my teeth go when I'm chewing over something I don't particularly like. "We'll get to the metal forest. We'll get help, and we'll come back for you, the both of you."

"What if you don't make it, Momma? No one makes it," I say, voice all small, and she's shaking her head, reaching out, rubbing my arm like she did when I used to get the shakes.

"We'll make it 'cause we have to," she says.

But she doesn't say what's even truer than that.

She's doing this because we're all starving.

Things used to be different. I always think about the "used to," because it seems it "used to" be better than it is now. Always "used to" be better. I'm stuck in "used to." I know I am. But I like thinking about the times when it wasn't so bad outside.

But it was always pretty bad, truth be told.

I bury my face in my hands. I won't look at my parents because I'm trying to remember them the way they "used to" be. Daddy used to be a little taller, not stooped, and Momma had such a fierce pride. You could see it in the way her shoulders were thrown back, as if she challenged the Ragers to take another baby, to just *try*. Momma and Daddy haven't been themselves in years, and I know that, and Han knows that.

And we're all grown up now, aren't we? If our parents don't come back, we'll make our way because we have to, because you survive, right? You always survive, try to, no matter what.

I go to sleep sobbing, but all silent-like. I can't let them hear me. I don't want to upset Momma and Daddy. I've seen almost twenty winters. Childhood is long behind me, and I've got nothing for certain besides my brother and an awful distrust of everything in the world to see me through.

Those are the things I thank the earth for, on nights that I can see far enough to be grateful.

I'm not grateful tonight.

Momma's plan, as she explains it in the morning, is nothing short of crazy. Not that I tell her this, though, 'cause she's got that look in her eyes that says *just try and convince me otherwise*. I'm no good at convincing, and Han and I exchange a shrugging glance: she's dead-set on going, and nothing's gonna stop her now.

Momma and Daddy say that they'll meet the strangers at Two-Top Heap, climb into the car and then go--go fast. They promise that they'll have the driver circle back through the Heap so that we can see the people, see that they're all right. They make us promise to wait here, wait for them to come back, at least three turns of the moon, and we promise, and it's right around now that I realize that Momma and Daddy are really leaving, and they're probably leaving for good.

Forever.

I hate that word.

"Greta, you take care of your brother. And you, Han, look after your sister," says Momma, stern--like she used to be when we were little and moaned all the time about being hungry. We don't moan about it anymore. But there are tears at the corners of Momma's eyes now, and if she starts crying, I won't be able to stop crying myself, so she wipes her face with the back of her hand and nods, smiling. "You'll be all right. You've each other, yeah? Don't trust anyone but each other." She kisses us both on our foreheads, and I grip her so tight, I probably bruise her ribs. I hug Daddy, too, and then Momma and Daddy are out, gone, and I'm closing my eyes, because the room is spinning.

We're starving. We can't find good food anymore. The little bits we do find make us sick. We can count our ribs. We're real weak. If death

doesn't get you as a Rager, it gets you this way. That's what Daddy told me once, when he was in a bad place.

So if they don't come back...

"Don't be thinking your dark thoughts," says Han, shaking my shoulders none too gently. I wrestle out of his grasp, growling at him, but he pursues me. "I'm serious, Greta. We gotta think of a way to get out of this."

"What are you talking about?" I mutter, "You know we're just gonna die."

"That's what I'm talking about! Shit!" And he hits the wall, making the whole little house shudder something fierce before he sinks down on his chair at the table, his head in his hands.

"You think this is easy for me?" he whispers, and it scares me, hearing him talk that way. I shake my head.

"Let's just go wave them goodbye," I say, holding out my hands to him, and he gets up, brushes past me and out into the sunshine of another pretty day. I follow him, and we climb the tallest pile in the Heap. I remembered to take my bag with me, the one with the glasses that can make you see real far. I bring the glasses out now, put them to my eyes, adjust them a little. I can see the car at Two-Top Heap, waiting for Momma and Daddy. I tell Han as much.

I watch Momma and Daddy getting close to it now. I make the glasses zoom in even closer, because I don't trust anything.

The woman in the front of the car gets out, opens the back part of the car, takes Momma and Daddy's little bags, puts them in there. She's shutting the back when Han pokes me, whispers, "You see anything'?" and I'm hissing at him to be quiet, and then the woman turns, and I almost skid down the pile of rubble, but Han catches the belt loop in my pants and keeps me from falling down, and then I'm throwing the glasses at him, trying to run down the pile, but he doesn't let me, and then he's looking through them himself and saying, "oh, shit—oh, shit," 'cause he sees what I did, and then we're both trying to make our way down the pile, even as the car is circling through the Heap, just like Momma promised, but we're never gonna make it down before they circle through.

The driver has the first signs of the sickness, the gray spiderwebs behind her ears, and the only thing I can think is that Momma and Daddy's eyesight must be failing them, because how could they not see that? I take

in a big lungful of air. I'm trying not to sob as I run, but it's impossible, because the car is already passing by our pile, and we hit the ground running, our feet pounding the dirt as my momma puts an arm through the window and waves goodbye to us, not even looking back.

They're going to get the sickness.

They're going to become Ragers.

Or they're going to die.

I collapse on the ground, pounding it so fast with my fists that the thudding matches my own heartbeat. Han falls beside me, and he's crying too, bless him. We both hold each other for a long while as we wail, and the stupid birds circle overhead, waiting for us to die, I suspect. We don't give 'em the satisfaction. We get up, and we make our way back into the Home, and then we sit at the table, and we stare at one another. I've never seen Han look so white.

I should go back outside, look through my glasses to see if they made it. But I can't. What if I see... I don't want to see—

"It's over," he finally says, and that makes the sobs rise in my throat again, and I put my face in my hands.

"I don't understand how they couldn't see it," I say, between sobs, getting only a handful of words out before I hiccup with them all over again, sobbing, sobbing.

"Greta, *Greta*," he yells, but his voice sounds gentler than it usually does when he's talking to me. I guess he has patience for me and my *fragility* today. "Greta, maybe they saw, yeah? Maybe they thought they could get to help before the sickness struck. Or, you know...maybe they wanted to die."

I stare at him, speechless.

"You're crazy." I back my chair away, scraping its legs on the floor.

"We survive, and we don't trust *anybody*. That's what we *do*, Han. We always *survive*." And I don't even realize it, but I'm shrieking now. I clap my hands over my mouth. *Don't be too loud*. That's another rule. Always, always remember: the Ragers could hear you.

"It's over. What do we do now?" he whispers, and he's looking at me all uncertain, and he's not just saying that to *say* it. He's *asking* me.

This is what I feel like doing: I want to lay down on the pile of rags that I call my bed, and I want to cry until I have no water left in me, and then I want to fall asleep and die. I think that might be the easiest, best

solution to this great big problem we've got here. We've got no food. We haven't for awhile. We've got no hope of getting any. We're going to die, and it won't be all nice and quick as what happens with the Ragers. It'll be drawn out and terrible.

And Momma and Daddy aren't coming back with help. I know they aren't, and it surprises me that, for a little bit, I actually believed they might.

I look down at my hands, how thin they are. I shudder.

"I don't really want to die, you know?" I say, and a single, fat tear slides down my nose and splashes on the tabletop. Han sighs, long and low, and then he stands up, pacing across the floor.

"I don't, either," he says, and it's almost apologetic. "So, we gotta do something, yeah?"

"Do what, Han?" My words sound more bitter than I wanted them to, and Han looks all hurt. He stops walking back and forth and glances sidelong at me, brows drawn together.

Han came four years after me, a little bundle of limbs. He never cried. He cooed, waving his fingers at the tips of my braids when I teased him. I've never stopped loving my brother, not even when he grew into this hotheaded young man. But it's real odd, that--when he's standing there, looking at me like that--I don't see the man anymore. I see the little boy he once was. Unsure. Hungry.

Afraid.

I guess it's in that moment that I realize one of us has to be *not* afraid. Or, at least, has to be a bit better about hiding it, or we won't leave here, we won't try *anything*, and we'll lose, and we'll die.

I can't bear the thought of giving up, not really. I can't. I stand up, too.

"We could...we could..." I'm scrabbling, and Han knows it, folding his arms over his chest, his expression glum.

Then the words tumble out of my mouth like a story, like a tale, even before I can crash my teeth together, stop this idea from coming out: "We could go to the metal forest ourselves."

"You're crazy," Han says too quick, shaking his head at me. "We would never, *ever* make it. The Ragers--"

"Just hush, just hush," I say, as Momma would, and I pinch the bridge of my nose, staring up at the ceiling, trying to think. And I *have* thought of it, thought of it countless times since my parents devised that as the Plan

That Would Save Us when I was very small. That was before the Ragers had begun to multiply, before the other family that used to live with us tried to leave for the metal forest and never came back. And not in a nice way like, "Well, maybe they made it."

We heard them screaming all the way from here.

We used the glasses, and we saw them get eaten.

But it's not that far, the metal forest. On the tallest pile in the Heap, it's easy to count the trees in it: twenty-two. That's how many there are.

The forest's close, but it's just far enough that a person on foot could never get ahead of the Ragers to make it to safety. And that's the thing--there are stories, *rumors* of safety in the metal forest, but it's not a sure thing, and no one knows what to look for to find it, this mysterious safeness. That's why being in a car was going to maybe make it okay for Momma and Daddy.

The Ragers can't go as fast as a car, and they're no match for the metal bulk of it. You're pretty safe in a car.

On foot, you're dead.

"Just let me think," I whisper, sitting back down in my chair. That's all I do, though, think, think, and never find solutions to anything.

Han is giving me a look that says as much, but he's not actually *saying* it, which I guess is good. It means he hasn't completely given up hope yet. Have I? I press my hands together, stare down at my grubby pants.

"What if we took the bikes?" I ask him. I don't look up, don't see what expression is on his face, but there's a snort and then silence.

I don't have any other ideas.

Apparently, he doesn't either. "Yeah," he says, slowly, carefully. "We could...try."

We both stare at one another for a long moment, eyes wide, breathing fast, quick.

"You mean it," I say, and he nods, and I nod, too, because I mean it. Yeah, I mean it.

Oh, god. We're gonna try.

*

We found the bikes one winter in a trash pile we'd never dug through much. They were pretty good bikes, rusted at the handles. Han and I had

never seen such things before, but Momma and Daddy told us what they were and got all excited, so we got excited, too. They said you could cover distances pretty fast, and it didn't tire you out so much as running. For a little while, they thought they'd use the bikes to get to the metal forest, but that was before the Ragers started getting faster.

They're real fast now.

Yeah, we're probably going to die.

I think it, think it so clearly, it's like I'm saying it, and I guess Han hears me in that way he has. He cocks his head, looks at me in the brand-new morning sunshine. We have the bikes propped up, and I'm knotting my bag over my shoulder, trying to make it close enough to my body so that if a Rager reaches for me, it may not actually grab *me*.

"We could stay," I say, voice all small, but Han's already shaking his head, putting his leg over his bike.

I passed a pretty sleepless night, and I've tried not to think much about anything, but here's the facts, all cold and hard and sharp: our parents are gone, and we don't have any more choices. I mean, we didn't have a whole lot of choices in the first place, but now...

"I don't want to give 'em the satisfaction of an easy kill," Han says, and he's hanging his head, glaring down at his fingers wrapped around the handlebars as if they're the cause of all this hardship. I rub at my face, straddle my bike, too.

"The Ragers can't win everything, Greta," Han finishes, and the words linger between us, light as dust.

"Well, then, let's go," I say, gritting my teeth, kicking the pedals up.

And, just like that, we're going.

We rode the bikes in the Heap plenty over the years. We're good at riding them, and I'm pedaling all leisure-like now, saving my strength for when we get out of the Heap and have to pedal for our lives.

It's been awhile since I traveled to the edge of the Heap, looked out beyond, tried to spot Ragers. Daddy said sometimes it seemed as if their numbers were going down, but we don't know anything truthful, not really. We don't know whether there are fewer now or not. I can only hope--my chest all tight, my breathing hard--that there's some kind of mercy in our fates today.

I don't want to die.

I mean, no one *wants* to die, I'm sure. But I *really* don't want to. Momma taught us, from the youngest of ages, that life is all we got, life's all that's free, and sometimes it isn't free, really, but at least you've got it when you don't have much else. So I guess I cling to it, but I've got a right to. I've never had anything else but my life. It's mine and mine alone.

It's not the Ragers'.

They make this odd sound, which is a good thing, 'cause it's how you know they're coming. It's kind of a moan, kind of a groan, kind of a *scream*, and it sets your hair on end something fierce. As we clear the last hills of junk that make up the border of the Heap, we hear the first awful moan coming from our right, coming right for us. I kick the pedals faster, faster, and Han shouts, "Two of 'em, on the right!" And that's when we go *real* fast.

I see a moving blur to the side of me, red and fleshy colored, and, yeah, the fear grabs me, makes my stomach fall away like it was cut right out, but it also makes me *angry*. I hate them, hate them so much. I don't have words to contain all that hate. The Ragers are coming for me and my brother, and I'm not gonna let 'em stop us. I *refuse*.

They look human because they are. Sort of. That's how Momma explained it to me. They're sick people, and they're sort of not-human, because they're not like us. It's not like you can reach into them for some sort of kindness. They're not like animals, either, because animals can be stopped by fear. Animals *think*. Ragers don't. They just get hungry, and then they hunt and they chase and they eat.

Just like they're chasing us now. Just like they want to eat us up now.

"Zigzag!" I cry out, and Han understands without any explaining, which I'm grateful for, and we're zigzagging on the bikes, which I guess confuses the Ragers, because I don't see them anymore. They're good for short bursts of speed, but they get confused easily, and it's a relief to know that that's still true about 'em. Sometimes they change, and you don't know that they've changed until the change makes them bite you faster.

I see a female Rager now, see her clear as day, and a lot closer than I've seen any Rager in years. She's barreling toward us from around a rusted piece of metal, head and shoulders down, running at us so fast it terrifies me. I've never seen them move *that* fast.

One of her hands is gone--the Ragers fight amongst themselves, even eat each other sometimes--and blood pumps out of her wrist. It's a fresh

wound. That means that, where she came from, there's at least one other, maybe more.

She's up ahead and to the right, but if we keep zigzagging, maybe we can avoid her. Them.

She makes such a sound now, a sound not like any I've heard before, and every hair of mine stands on end, and I shudder, closing my eyes for only a blink, but then I take in that she *called* the others. I've never seen Ragers communicate before, but now about twenty of 'em are lumbering from behind a big metal building, one of the few buildings left standing near the Heap now, and I'm shouting at Han to go faster, and he's shouting back at me that he's doing his best, but keep going, keep going, and we pedal so fast, all I can think is that we've been pedaling all our lives, and maybe this is a nightmare, and maybe I'll wake up, and Momma and Daddy and Han and I will be Home, and we'll have enough to eat, and we'll be all right.

Han makes a little cry. He's right behind me. I look under my arm, and he's pedaling fast, faster, face white as chalk. The Rager behind him is so close, she makes a pass at his arms, and there's a tearing sound as her fingernails rake through his jacket.

"Come on!" I scream at him, and he's trying; I know he's trying. I slow down, get neck-and-neck with him, but he's shaking his head.

"Don't, Greta," he growls, and I don't know if he's yelling at me for slowing down or yelling at me for yelling at him, or maybe he's just yelling at me for hoping. But he gets a surge of speed, then, and we both shoot ahead, and the metal forest is getting closer, but what's real odd about it is that, closer now, it doesn't look like a forest. The metal things don't look like trees anymore. They just look like tall buildings.

We're pedaling so fast, and I'm getting weary. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up, and Han is still white, too white. But now I look up at these buildings, old skeletons of buildings. And we're between the first two, and they tower over me. Under other circumstances, maybe not being chased and all, I might find these buildings awful interesting. But as it is, I *don't*, and all I can think is *where's the safety we were promised?* And I'm pissed.

"Keep going!" I yell at Han, and he nods, but it's a weak little nod, and he's slowed down on his pedaling. We have a trail of Ragers behind us, bellowing and tripping and running so fast. For all I know, there are Ragers

here, too, in the metal forest (I still call it that in my head, though I know it's not really a forest at all). I just want to see people, real people, not Ragers. I want to know where to go. I want to find safety.

I want help.

I try not to think about it, but it's an angry, nagging little thought, and it comes sliming up my throat now to lodge in my head: What if there isn't anyone here to help us? What if there isn't anyone here?

That's a hard blow. All my life, I knew that if we could just get to the metal forest, we'd be safe, and it was bittersweet, it being so close but so very far.

My lungs constrict, and I feel like I can't breathe as the overwhelmingness of this truth fills my whole body. I think Han must be thinking it, too, because he's slowing down even more, and I remember the family we saw get eaten by Ragers. Those monsters were so strong, they broke the momma's head clear off her neck, and it was so fast, so quick, that dying.

Maybe dying that way wouldn't be all that bad.

A little sob catches in my throat.

Am I giving up?

I don't know what to do.

"Over here!" That's not a Rager's voice... That's a *real* voice, a human voice saying *words*, and all of a sudden, my heart is pounding even faster than it was before, and I don't even think; I just veer to the right, and Han veers to the right, too, and there's this strange, colorful building before us, a small one, not as big as the others, and there are stripes and spots, all colors, all over it, and it looks happy. I don't know why I think that, but it *does* look happy, and it reminds me of a candy wrapper I found in one of the piles in the Heap. Momma had to explain to me what a candy wrapper was, what a candy was, and I remember thinking about candy all day long, 'cause it was the most glorious thing I'd ever heard of.

It's a woman calling out to us, a woman that doesn't look like a Rager. She doesn't have their reddish tinge--'cause their blood is always pumping too fast--or their empty eyes. She looks *human*.

When she opens the door behind her and gestures us toward it, a cry chokes me, because the Ragers are so close, but the woman dashes inside, and then Han and I roll through the door and inside, too, and the door is shut fast behind us, and the Ragers are locked out.

I run into the wall--I can't brake fast enough--but Han just sort of tips over, tangled up with his bike.

I'm so dazed that I just sit there, sit on my bike in this room. There are sparks in front of my eyes, sparks everywhere; I can't focus.

"You're all right. You're safe," croons that pretty voice, and there's cool skin against my cheek--a hand, five fingers. I close my eyes.

Safe. I love that word, and I hate it at the same time. But right now, I love it a little more than I hate it.

I guess I black out for a little while, because when I open my eyes again, the light in the room is a different color. I feel better. I stand up and put a hand to my head.

The room is pink, real pink, and there are white curlicues at the top edges of the walls and around the door and windows. The windows are barred, and the glass looks thick, but I still can't help but shudder when I look out the window and see a Rager there, right *there*, staring at me with vacant, bloodshot eyes.

"Let me close that for you," the pretty voice says, and I turn toward it, toward her. She crosses in front of me, and then curtains are drawn over the window, and the light still comes through, but I can't see the Rager anymore.

The woman turns and looks at me, gives me a real nice smile. She's wearing a black scarf on her head, but she unties it now, takes it off, lets it flow over her arm. Her right eyebrow is arched up, like she's surprised about something. I can't help staring at her, really. The first thing I take in is that there's no dirt on her. She's all clean. Her hair is soft-looking and blonde, swept back, and she has paint on her face. It makes her lips red, that paint, and the skin over her eyes is sparkly somehow. I like it, but I've not seen anything like it before, so maybe it's the newness of it that I like.

She's not stick thin like me, all bones and skin. She's rounded, curved in nice places. I've never seen anyone with meat on their bones before, and I'm kind of awed by the sight of it.

She's real pretty.

"Hello," she says, nodding her head at me. "I'm Sabine. I'm very glad you're safe. Your brother is safe, too, so don't worry about him."

I just stay where I am, staring at her, and my mouth is hanging open, so I sort of snap it shut. She giggles at that, actually *giggles*. We never laughed much in my family--never really had a reason to.

"Are you all right?" she asks me, and there's concern on her face. I stare at her some more, and then I look down at myself, poke my legs, my knees, my shoulders.

"Yeah, I guess I'm in one piece," I tell her, and she giggles again, which I decide I sort of like. It's a nice sound.

"I'm glad to hear that," she says, and she crosses the space between us, sits down on the edge of the bed behind me. I guess I was laying on that bed when I woke up. This close, Sabine smells like something good, and though I don't know what it is she smells like, it smells like something I'd like to eat a lot of. My mouth is watering.

"Are you hungry?" she asks, like she knew what I was thinking. I nod real quick, and she bounces up with an "oh!" The door was closed, but she's opened it now, gone out into another room, and I can smell more things out there.

I smell food.

I'm halfway across the room before even I know it, and then I'm out the door and standing in the middle of the next room, and if I were a religious woman, I'd likely say I'd walked straight to heaven.

It's pink in here, too, with a pale blue floor, and things smell sweet. Sweet and good. That's what I notice first. The woman, Sabine, is showing me a rounded thing with crisscrosses on the top.

"This is a blueberry pie," she says helpfully, setting it down on a table that's checkered pink and blue. The table's so pretty, I don't want to get it all dirty by sitting at it, but she pulls out a chair for me, gestures toward it with her hand. "Please sit," she says, and she's smiling at me, so I sit down, and then she pushes the pie right in front of me, and she hands me a fork, and I didn't have any manners back home, so I'm not learning any now, and I just start shoveling this pie stuff into my mouth.

I know for certain that I *did* die and go to heaven, and I guess all that religion stuff Momma told me about was kind of right. I try to breathe around the pie I've crammed into my mouth, but I have to swallow it to breathe, and I don't *want* to swallow it; I want to taste it forever. Sabine sits down next to me, puts her chin in her hands, watches me with bright blue eyes.

"It's okay," she says, softly, gently. "There's more where that came from. And you'll be fine. You won't get sick from eating so much. You were near starvation, so I gave you a shot to help your stomach adjust..."

I don't really know what she's talking about, but I keep eating the pie.

"Han," I force out around mouthfuls.

Sabine cocks her head, nods. "Yes, he's sleeping," she says simply, looking away. "He's all right. He was awake before you. He ate a lot of pie, too."

I struggle to my feet, wipe at my mouth with the back of my hand. "I need to see him," I say. "He's my brother."

Sabine stands up beside me, her hands clasped before her. "I'll show you," she whispers, guiding me toward a door in the opposite wall. It has a little glass window in it, and when we get close, I peer through. I see Han sleeping peacefully on a bed just like the one I woke up on. He looks happy: his mouth is curved into a smile.

That sets my mind at ease.

"I'll eat more pie," I offer, all magnanimous, and sit down at the table, tuck back in. "Can you explain some things now?"

"Well," says Sabine carefully, drawing out the word, "what do you want to know? Where exactly did you two come from?"

"The Heap," I say, mouth full of blueberries, "and I don't know much of anything, so I want to see if what I know is right. Did a car come through here, maybe yesterday? There would have been..." I think about this. "Six people in it?"

Sabine shakes her head, her mouth a thin line. "I haven't seen anyone but you and Han lately. Well, and the Ragers."

This makes me stop chewing for a moment, and I swallow hard. No car. So they didn't make it. We didn't see the car anywhere on our ride out of the Heap, but we didn't stick to the path, and we weren't looking around at scenery all that much.

I knew they wouldn't make it—once you get those spiderwebs, you turn pretty fast—but I guess there'd been some small part of me that believed they might.

"Was there someone close to you who..." Sabine starts, but I'm crying again, wiping my mouth on the back of my arm, rubbing at my eyes. I don't make any noise, don't sob, but I'm still crying. I can't help it.

They're gone, really gone.

I have to get used to that.

"My parents," I say after a real long moment. "They'd found some people in a car and tried to go with them to here, the metal forest, but--"

"Metal forest?" asks Sabine, interested.

"That's what Momma called this place," I tell her, looking down at the plate that holds the rest of the pie.

"And you came from the Heap," she repeats, eyes trained on my own, not wavering. I like her eyes: they're real blue, light blue.

"Yeah," I say, wrinkling my nose. "It's just big piles of garbage, but there's some good scavenging, and my parents raised us there."

"I see," she says, and I can tell that she's putting that away to chew on later.

"Anyway, what is it that you do? What's this place?" I say, waving my blue-stained hands around.

Sabine smiles at me. "This is an old candy shop, a factory," she says, getting up, walking over to touch the blue lacing around the doorway. "Before...everything, this place sold sweets, so it made sense for us to set up shop here. Me and my brother."

"You have a brother, too?" I ask, and she nods, grin widening.

"Robert and I work here..." She trails off, looks at me, and wipes her hands on her apron.

"You work here? Are there other people in the metal forest? Do other people work here?" I ask, hope making my words come fast.

She pauses for a long moment before she shakes her head. "No," she says in a low voice. "Not for a long while."

"I don't understand," I whisper, and I'm burying my fingers in my hair, so frustrated in that moment, I don't feel like I can breathe. "There were supposed to be all *sorts* of people," I hear myself saying, as if from some faraway place. "There was supposed to be safety—"

"Well," she says, and she moves next to me, sits down, pats my leg. Her hand is so warm, I feel her heat through the thin fabric. I look up. I can't read what her face is saying. "You've found safety," she says. "You're safe here. You can stay for a while. Really, as long as you'd like. You're safe--"

I shake my head. "You don't get it," I say, and I don't mean for it to come out all unkind-like, but it does, and it weighs heavy in the air between us. "All my life, I've been looking for safety. Safety is a place where the Ragers can't touch us. Where there are *no* Ragers." My hands curl into fists. Sabine doesn't say anything, just watches me. "Now I know the place I

always *thought* was safe...isn't. There's you and your brother, and you guys have food, pie, but that won't last. It never does. It's never enough--"

"It will last," says Sabine, all quiet, but I barrel on, because how could that possibly be true?

"We need to find someplace *safe*," I repeat, but she's shaking her head.

"You've found it."

I narrow my eyes. We stare at one another for a long moment before Sabine looks down at her hands, sighs.

"It'll be all right," she says. "What's your name?"

"Greta." The word grates in my mouth, hard-edged.

"It's good to meet you." Her hand crosses the space between us, touches my knee. "I'm glad you've come."

I know she means it by how opened up her face is, real honest. I swallow, look down at my hands, now, too, at her hand on my knee. She's warm, and everything I smell is good. I relax a little, shocked that I'm able to.

"Now," says Sabine, standing, "let me introduce you to my brother, Robert. And let me show you around our home."

We leave the pink-and-blue room--and the remains of my pie, with promises from Sabine that I can come back and finish it later, and more where that came from--and we're in a hallway painted with red-and-white stripes. The stripes make me feel a little dizzy as we walk.

"This used to be a candy shop and candy factory, like I said." Sabine pulls the door at the end of the hall inwards, gesturing out. I step forward, then almost run into her when I back up quickly. There's a walkway and a thin railing around a chasm that falls down, down, pretty far, and—below—there are metal things, whirring and clicking and making sounds. It's eerie. I don't like it, but Sabine's hand is on my shoulder.

"It's okay," she says gently. "This is the stuff that helps us make the pies and cakes and cookies. Machines."

"Where do you..." I swallow. "Where do you get the stuff to make them?"

She shrugs, looks away. "There were a lot of supplies here when we came. And we've been able to find more. There were stores, other places that had food..." She trails off and then points at something. "Down there are the fridges and ovens. The fridges run on the generator. We found a lot

of gas, and the ovens are old-fashioned, so they run on wood, which we've got a big store of."

I don't understand much of her explanation, but I listen, polite-like, casting glances down and into what I'm thinking of now as the Pit, and watching Sabine talk. When she talks, she makes sweeping gestures with her hands, and her mouth moves into all sorts of shapes. I keep watching her mouth, her lips, and again, I think to myself that she's real pretty, which is kind of surprising, that I like that she's pretty. I like that she's nice to me. She's soft in a way that I've not seen before. It's different.

"There's Robert," she says, angling her finger toward the Pit, pointing to a man with a shovel, his back to us. The door to the oven is open, and he's pushing pieces of wood into it. He turns, as if he knows we're looking at him, and then he's grinning and waving. He's tall, has broad shoulders, and a face that shows me he's Sabine's brother: all wide-eyed and kind-looking. He puts down his armful of wood and makes his way up the little winding staircase to stand on the landing with us.

I explain about the Heap to him, manage to get out the story of my parents without starting to sob again as he pumps my hand up and down, though I have to stop talking for a heartbeat or two, breathe in and out. He agrees with Sabine—that we're safe now and that we need to stay here, can stay here with them. I admit, when he says it, it doesn't sound the same as when Sabine said it. I know he means it, but my mistrust gets all spiky when he talks.

I'll think on that later.

"You must be very tired," says Sabine eventually, closing the door on her brother and the Pit and the ovens and the machines. I stretch a little, arms ahead of me, shake my head. I'm worried about my brother; I want to check on him before I sleep.

"How safe are we?" I ask as we start back along the hallway.

Sabine casts her eyes upwards, taking in the faraway ceiling. "Pretty safe," she says. "No Rager has ever broken in, if that's what you're thinking. They pass through a lot—you'll see them through the windows--but they don't linger long in the city."

"City," I say, and she's nodding, smiling.

"You called it the metal forest, but this place was once a city. Lots of big buildings crowded together where many people worked and lived." We

pause at the barred window in the hall, look out at this "city." I can't blame the Ragers; it doesn't look like a place I'd ever choose to live in.

"You're safe, Greta." Sabine lays a hand on my arm. I sigh.

"I didn't think," I say slowly, "that this is how it would all end. That Momma and Daddy would just give up, that we'd end up in a place like this. I didn't think anything would ever change, and I'm sad they're gone. Real sad." A sob escapes my throat, but I swallow it down. "But we're here. We survived. I can't believe... I mean, we did survive, yeah?" I look down at my hands gripping on the windowsill, see how white-knuckled they are.

"Yes," Sabine says. "You were very brave, and you survived."

Outside, I watch the empty streets, the blowing bits of trash, the trees growing in the cracks in the ground, bending this way and that in the wind.

I'm *alive*.

*

I sit on the edge of Han's bed with my feet drawn up and my arms around my knees. I just watch him breathe. In sleep, he looks just like my little brother, the little boy I remember. His breaths are small and shallow, but he's still grinning in his sleep, and he looks okay, as far as I can tell.

It's night. I hate night. Bad things happen at night. But for the first time in a good, long while, I'm not afraid. Sabine showed me the doors and the locks, showed me all of the alarms she has rigged with metal things that clang together, make noise to wake you up. No way is a Rager getting in here, and if one did, we'd be ready for it.

"Will you have some cake?" Sabine calls from the next room, and I don't know what she's talking about, but I get up and follow the sound of her voice, leaving my brother to his dreams.

"Cake?" I ask, and I sit down at the pink-and-blue table again. Sabine smiles widely and sets in front of me this big round thing that smells so good. I don't even know what to *do* with how good it smells, so I kind of just stare at it. Sabine laughs a little, flicks her finger over the cake. A bit of the brown stuff comes off on her finger, and she licks it, grinning.

"Give it a try," she says, encouraging. "It's chocolate. Everyone loves chocolate."

I touch my finger to the cake and am surprised to find the surface of it is soft, and my finger gets that stuff on it, too. When I lick it off, I'm a

religious woman again, because this is the most miraculous thing I've ever tasted, and I swallow, and my toes are curling, and then I laugh a lot, and Sabine's laughing, too.

"I like chocolate," I declare, and then I take up the fork, because I guess I'm trying to have manners now--or at least have manners around Sabine--and I'm carving out great big chunks of the cake with the fork, and soon, before I know it, the cake is gone, and I lean back in the chair, sticky and happier, so much happier, than I've ever been.

Sabine, sitting next to me, watches me from beneath her long lashes, a little smile on her face, and suddenly I can't look at her. I'm all bashful. Did I eat too fast? Does she think I'm greedy?

"I knew you'd like it!" she declares, clearing the plate away and returning from the counter with another plate covered in miniature cakes.

"Cupcakes," she says, her grin almost devilish. "I think you'll like these, too."

I do. I do a lot. Before I know it, I'm licking my fingers, all seven of the cupcakes devoured.

Sabine replaces the plate of cupcakes with a big bowl. "Pudding." She points to the slick surface, and I dip my finger in that, licking it clean. It's chocolate--I know that now--and it tastes so good.

I lick some pudding off my finger again, and then Sabine gives me a spoon, and...

Is it possible that I ate that whole bowl of pudding myself? I blink in wonderment. I suppose it is.

The bowl's empty.

Again, Sabine is looking at me through her lashes, grinning wide, and I'm happy she's happy, but I'm so full and sleepy that when she sets down another plate of something and calls it brownies, I shake my head, tell her I want to sleep.

Her expression changes. "Are you sure?" she asks, and then she's looking out the window, from the darkness back to me, brows furrowed. "I thought you weren't tired yet."

"I wasn't until I ate all that food," I say, yawning and stretching and smiling. But Sabine's not smiling anymore. Worry crinkles her face, and she's standing tall and tense, circling me.

"I'll just go lay down, catch a few winks," I tell her, standing up, too. I head to the room that had my bed in it, and Sabine follows me. When I lay

down, she kneels beside me, puts her hand to my forehead. She's still real warm.

"Yes, you should sleep..." she begins, but I'm asleep before I hear her finish what she was trying to say.

*

I wake up in the morning not because I was done sleeping but because my stomach is growling something fierce.

I get up, stretch. I still feel so *happy*, which makes the guilt rise up, try to grab me with its teeth. My parents are gone, but I have food to eat, and this woman is so nice, and Han is safe. I rub at my face with my hands, prop my elbows on my knees as I look down at the floor. They wouldn't want me to keep being sad, Momma and Daddy, but I still have that ache, even under all the happy feelings. I don't reckon the ache will ever go away.

I make my way out into the room with the pink-and-blue table and find it empty, so I look through the little window into Han's room. He's still asleep, grinning like he's eaten chocolate. What a lazybones! I roll my eyes and survey the bare counter where, last night, Sabine kept all of those sweets.

I poke my belly, mounded a little now with the chocolate inside of it, and I marvel. I'd never eaten food before that didn't make me feel sick or empty, had never had food that didn't make me gag. I'd thought food was a nuisance, a curse, but now, *now* I'd had cake, and life felt different somehow.

"Oh!" comes a little voice from the doorway, and I turn, and there's Sabine in a red-and-white checked apron, carrying a big tray of something sweet-smelling into the room. She's staring at me, and her eyes are round, and so is her mouth. "You're...awake?" she says, and then she crosses to the counter, sets her tray down, and comes to feel my forehead again. I don't mind that she does it, but it's a little odd when she presses her one hand to my forehead and her other hand to her own forehead, and she stands there, gazing at me for a couple of heartbeats before she pulls back.

"How do you feel?" she asks, and her voice is a little high pitched, which is strange, but I hook my fingers in my belt loops, smile at her.

"Never better," I say, and I'm eyeing the tray of sweets sidelong-like, and she laughs a little, indicates the table, and then I'm sitting down, and

she's putting the tray before me.

"These are cookies," she says, but I'm already eating them, sweet little things with sparkly bits on top. I have one in each hand, and I'm making a mess of crumbs.

Sabine sits down beside me, watches me eat, her chin in her hands. "Are you sure you feel all right?" she asks, worried-sounding.

"I'm good," I say around bites, and then, because I want to know, I ask, "How are you?"

She looks surprised. "I'm...fine. I'm grateful that you're well." I don't know what she's thinking when she looks at me, but she's got on a funny expression I haven't seen before. "You really feel good this morning?"

She's starting to spook me. I pat myself all over, make sure I'm not missing any limbs. "I think I'm all right. Shouldn't I be?"

And then she's shaking her head quickly, still smiling, a little too wide. "Of course you should be. That's great. I just thought...since you got so tired so quickly last night..." She shakes her head again. "Never mind me. I'm just being silly. Of course you were exhausted after your terrible experience."

"Of course," I repeat, watching her. She won't look at me. She's rising then, and she takes the tray from the table. "I'll just go get more." She moves quickly through the swinging door.

Well, that was odd. I stand up, ready to follow after her, ask her what's the matter, but I sit back down. Do I want to go borrowing trouble? Momma always said I had a real nasty habit of doing that. When something nice would happen--like Han would get sick (not like the sickness, not ever like the sickness, just...sick), and then he would get better--I'd be telling Momma that the other shoe would drop now, and I said something like that, I remember, when the Ragers came and got Mary.

I rub my forehead with my fingers, try to push such thoughts away.

Sabine comes back into the room, the tray overflowing with cupcakes again, and her smile is easy, normal. Which is good. I like her smile, like how pretty she looks when she smiles. When she sets the tray down in front of me, sits beside me, I catch her hand with my own, which makes her go all still for a moment.

"Thanks for giving me these things to eat," I tell her, trying my best to show good manners. "I really like them."

Her hand fits nice in mine, and she looks all flushed, like she's blushing, which makes her face look even prettier.

"It's my pleasure," she says, voice all warm, and she's looking up at me through those lashes again, and something happens in my belly, though it'd be real hard to describe. Something like a flip-flopping. I like it, I think. It's just a new feeling.

I drop her hand, and I stuff a cupcake into my mouth.

"You'd think I was a little piggy," I say, 'cause Momma used to call me that, *little piggy*, when I was little and picked mushrooms for myself and hid them in my pockets.

Sabine laughs, throwing her head all the way back.

I didn't think what I said was funny—I don't have much of a sense of humor, though—but the pleasure I get from making Sabine laugh is equal to how I feel when I'm eating chocolate. I like it a lot, and I want more.

When Sabine looks at me, her eyes all crinkled, her red lips curling up, I swallow the last bite of cupcake down, and then I'm rubbing my mouth on the back of my arm. I guess I do look like a little piggy with cake all over my face. And I don't want Sabine to see me that way.

"It's so nice to have you here," she says, leaning back, hands on her stomach, smiling gently. "I've missed..." she trails off, looks up at the ceiling.

We both stay quiet for a long moment, but the door swings inward, and there's Robert looking at me, eyebrows raised, all surprised. He throws a sharp glance at Sabine, who shrugs, brows raised, too.

"Greta!" he exclaims then, "I thought you were still asleep."

I don't understand what the preoccupation with sleep is around here, but I sit up a bit straighter as Robert crosses the space between us, taking in the cupcake wrappers and crumbs. "Did you really eat all of those?" he asks me, and then I'm bristling, because Sabine offered them to me, and what right has he--

"She did," says Sabine, standing quickly. "She woke up this morning. I found her out here." She and Robert stare at one another for a long moment, and then they're staring at me, and then Robert walks around me so fast, I whirl to glare a little at him.

"She doesn't have the--" He stops himself when Sabine shakes her head in a sharp little motion. "Well," he says, more slowly, "I'm glad you're up, Greta! Your brother is a late sleeper." He exchanges a glance with

Sabine. Every part of me is starting to spike up now, but Sabine shoves Robert toward the swinging door, and he says, "Hey!" but she keeps pushing till he's through.

"My brother," she mutters to me, dusting her hands on her apron, "is rather blunt."

"I don't understand what he meant by all that talk. Why did he keep staring--"

"Don't worry," Sabine says. "Everything's fine. Trust me."

"Hmm."

We don't trust anyone--that's what Momma always said--but then she went back on that when she got into the car with those infected people. I rub at my eyes, weary as I remember the car driving away, Momma's hand up in the air, waving at us. *Not even looking back.*

"Okay," I say, real soft, and Sabine sinks down beside my chair, leaning close, looking up at me with those round, blue eyes.

"I'm so glad you're here, Greta."

I know she means it. Her eyes are shining, and a tear spills down past her nose, over her cheek, over her chin. I don't even think about it: I wipe the tear away. It's so soft, her skin beneath my hand. I linger there, staring down at her, until I realize I've touched her for too long, and I snatch my hand away.

But her expression's changed now, and she's looking up at me through those lashes again, and she leans forward.

She gets real close, and my heart is thundering all anxious-like. And then she stops. She bites her lip, and she rises, wiping her hands on her apron—a nervous habit of hers, I think.

"I'll go get you more cake," she says, and turns on her heel.

"I'm not hungry anymore," I say to the swinging door.

*

I poke Han. I poke his face with my finger, but he keeps on sleeping. I kick the side of the bed, not even gently. "Han!" I yell. "Hey, Han, wake up!"

He doesn't stir.

I lean down and put my ear next to his mouth, real close. There's a gentle shush of breath, even though his chest doesn't rise and fall much.

He's still smiling, but he's been sleeping an awful long time. Days. My stomach clenches with worry. I mean, he tired himself out something fierce to get away from those Ragers. I know that. He's likely still sleeping off his tiredness. Maybe. I don't know.

Sabine says not to worry. Says he just knows he's safe now. He knows he can finally rest.

I try to believe her, but there's a nagging feeling inside of me, and I try not to think about it, but it pokes at me like a sharpened stick.

"I want to be helpful. Can I do some chores?" I ask Sabine when she comes in to find me sitting on the edge of Han's bed. She cocks her head and folds her arms.

"You'll be helpful soon enough," she tells me. "Don't worry about that now."

"But..." I begin, frustrated, but she's smiling again, shaking her head, and there's another tray of cupcakes in front of my nose, still warm and wafting sweetness.

This is real crazy, I admit it...but I'm getting a little sick of cupcakes.

"I don't think I'm hungry," I tell Sabine, and her forehead wrinkles up.

"You have to keep eating, Greta," she says. "You're skin and bones."

I stare down at my skinny arms, and then I hide them behind my back. "I mean, I'm awful grateful that you keep feeding me. But it seems real wasteful. What if we run out of food--"

"We won't." Sabine sinks down beside me, leans forward, and whispers, "Just keep eating the food, Greta. Just until we know."

"Until we know what? Wait--who's *we*?"

She's rising, and she looks nervous, and I suddenly realize that what I said might have sounded kind of mean, and I'm getting up, too, but she's backing away, smiling a hurt little smile.

"It'll be all right. You *have* to trust me." Sabine turns, taking the cupcakes away.

I go to my own room, flop on the bed and sulk.

They're not telling me something. That's obvious enough. I may not know much about this place, or cities—or anything, really, outside of the Heap--but I know enough about people to recognize when someone's keeping a secret.

Should I really trust these people? Okay, they've given me food, and I'm grateful for it, but am I that desperate for crumbs that I would trust any

stranger who offered me some? And I'm worried about Han—not like a little worry, but a *big* worry, a big worry curled up in my stomach around all those too-sweet cupcakes.

All I've done since we arrived at the metal forest is eat, eat, *eat*. And all Han's done is sleep. It's not *natural*.

I mean, after all we've been through, can we really be destined to spend the rest of our lives eating and sleeping and...nothing else?

Over the past couple of days, I've eaten cupcakes and pies and cakes and cookies and tarts and pastries, and I'm sick of all of them. But Sabine keeps asking me to eat, and I don't refuse her. Well, I never did before, not 'til today.

I think I made her sad by refusing. And that makes me sad. Real sad.

I chew on that thought for a moment, turning it this way and that in my heart.

Momma and Daddy found each other in the Heap, back when lots of people were still living there. Momma said it was love at first sight. I asked her what that meant, love at first sight, and she told me, when she first saw Daddy, there were little butterflies beating against her ribs. I knew what a butterfly was, of course, but I couldn't figure what they'd be doing inside of her. I was about six, so I didn't understand much then. I was just a scruffy little kid.

I rub at my eyes, press my hands against my stomach. Do I...like Sabine? Is that the feeling I get whenever she comes near me, when she puts her hand on my knee, when I make her laugh?

Yeah.

Yeah, I like her.

I don't know how I know it. I just know.

I wonder if she likes me, too. I wonder if that's why she makes me so many good things to eat. Could that be her way of showing me her feelings?

Or am I just as crazed as the Ragers?

I groan.

Sabine knocks on my door, comes in when I croak at her. She stands there looking over me, and she's not carrying sweets. Her arms are crossed all loose over her stomach. She's just staring, and when she stares at me like that, straight through her lashes, I never understand what it means. But I like it.

"Will you come eat more cupcakes now?" she asks me.

"Sorry." I shake my head. "I'm not hungry."

"Even if I ask you to?" And there's a little wheedling tone to her voice, the same tone I used when I used to ask Daddy if I could borrow the seeing glasses.

I sigh, shake my head. "No, I can't," I say, and Sabine nods, once, twice, though her chest rises and falls in a sigh.

"It's really important that you keep eating, Greta." It looks like she's going to say something more—I hope she will—but she closes her mouth, leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

*

I stayed in my room all afternoon, all evening--only leaving twice to check on Han--and I watched the shadows move behind my curtains. I knew the Ragers were outside. I couldn't work up enough courage to pull the curtains back to *look* at them, but I know they were out there. I know they can smell us. Sabine promised me that the glass is thick, and there are bars, and Ragers don't really know how to get into buildings, anyway, but Ragers change all the time. What if they suddenly get real strong? What if they get strong enough to break through thick glass and bend metal bars?

My blanket is tucked close around me. Now that the sun's gone, I can't make out any more shadows, but I bet the Ragers are still around. My stomach's all in knots. I can't really calm down.

Han's not awake yet. My worry is starting to become fear.

I lay on my bed and tremble, and I hear a sharp, groaning sound, and I sit bolt upright.

There *are* Ragers, right outside, right *there* at my window, and then there's something scraping at the glass, and I can't take it--I just *can't*. I get up, tripping over my own feet in the dark. I cross to the door, and I'm out and squinting in the bright, bright room with its pink-and-blue table, and the light flickering overhead is blinding.

I pad quietly to the window in Han's door and peer through. He hasn't moved; his belly is hardly rising and falling. I can't even see it rising and falling. I want him to roll his eyes at me, tell me I'm just being fragile again. I used to hate him so much when he teased me, because he *wasn't* fragile,

but I don't hate him anymore, not even a little bit. I'd give anything to have him back like he was, my ornery little brother, always making fun of me.

I feel so astonishingly lonely.

I wait until the feeling washes right through me, resolves in my belly, and then I turn from my brother's door, walk all fast to the swinging one that leads to the hallway that leads to the Pit.

I'll find Sabine there, I think, and I need to see her.

The hallway with its red-and-white stripes is stark in the light, doesn't put me in mind of candy at all, like Sabine said it was meant to. It makes me think of red-tinged skin, the skin of my little sister. My little *Rager* sister.

I stumble against the wall, my legs crumpling beneath me, and lean against the closed door to the Pit. I lean there a long while, and then—I don't know why I do it—I put my hand and ear to the door, and I listen.

There's no sound. I feel stupid. Sabine and Robert are likely in their bedrooms, asleep, though I don't know where their bedrooms are, and I wish that I did, that I could find Sabine right now, talk to her.

But there's a sound, then, a long, low moan that makes my every last hair stand on end.

I *know* that sound.

The only creature that makes *that* sound is a Rager.

And I heard it coming from out of the Pit.

Sense should make me turn right back around, run to my room, shut and lock the door and wait for morning. Sense should make me leave. *Now*. But I don't have much sense, never did, and a fist of fear squeezes my belly tight, but here's the truth: if there are Ragers in the Pit and Sabine is down there, too, she might need my help.

I have to help her.

I open the door. Well, I crack it first, peering in, past the narrow walkway.

Sabine *is* down there, and so is Robert. They're standing, poker straight, backs to the ovens. Their faces are empty, their eyes glistening in the firelight.

And there's a Rager right in front of them, crawling along the floor almost, more like rolling on one leg and a stump. Real badly hurt. But he's not hurt enough to not come after 'em, and I realize that as he crawls

forward, using his arms and good leg to shoot himself toward Sabine and Robert.

There's so much blood on the floor, the fire from the ovens reflecting in it, making everything glow an awful red.

The Rager moans again, scrabbling his hands on the wet floor, trying to pull himself along. Momma always told me that they were people, that they were just really sick people. She used words like *rabies* and *adrenaline*, and I never quite understood, but she knew all this from scraps of newspapers she found and read, from back when everything just started going bad in the world.

I'd believed Momma on most things, yeah, and Ragers look a little human, but there's not any real human left in them.

Watching this Rager claw at the ground, I can see that truth plain as day.

I'm not sure what happens next. It's all a blur.

Suddenly, the Rager's swinging overhead in a net after being ripped up away from the floor—trapped. Sabine is shouting at Robert to "close the door! We got it."

Robert runs past the swinging Rager, careful to stay clear of the bloodied hand poking through the netting, trying to take a swipe at him. And then Robert turns a corner, disappears from my sight, and I hear something metal slam down, and the moaning, the maddening moaning, stops.

The Rager is all quiet as he dangles there, swinging and watching. Sabine rubs at her shoulders, shivers a little as she gazes up at him.

Robert comes back, grabs a long hook. "Okay, help me get him down," he says, and Sabine helps him push and pull some big levers, and the Rager hits the ground with a wet thump.

Shoulder to shoulder, Sabine and Robert grab the end of the netting and begin to tug backwards, toward an area of the Pit I can't see from here.

"Don't you think this one is too badly gone?" I hear Sabine say, sounding out of breath, but Robert is shaking his head, and he mutters something about "every last one." Then I can't hear either of them anymore.

The Rager doesn't moan again but scrabbles about with his hand, trying to claw his way out of the net or grab Robert and Sabine to stop them from taking him. The stump where his foot used to be bleeds on the floor behind him.

Sabine and Robert drag the Rager out of my line of sight.
My eyes feel dry, like I haven't blinked in hours.
I close the door slowly, careful not to make a clicking sound.
My heart is hammering.
I don't know what I just saw. I don't understand any of it.
And I need to.

*

I can't sleep. Every time I shut my eyes, I see Sabine and Robert dragging that Rager along. There's a Rager inside this building with us, and, yeah, it's only got one foot, and it's kind of mangled, but that doesn't mean anything. It's a *Rager*, and it'd come after us the first chance it got.

How did it ever get inside?

I keep wavering on that. Maybe it got inside by accident, and Robert and Sabine have traps in the Pit to keep us all safe. I guess that'd make sense. But somehow, it looked like they'd planned it beforehand, like they'd *wanted* to trap that creature all along.

When Sabine comes for me in the morning, I stare at her. My eyes feel wider than a hoot owl's. I've decided I'm not going to ask her what happened. I sort of trust her, but I'm not sure if I trust her *entirely*, and I'm all confused about everything.

Maybe I'm just cowardly.

Still, I gaze at her miserably as she holds out a tray of brownies, and her smile—a tired-looking smile, and no wonder--falters.

"I don't want to eat," I lie, as Sabine sets the tray down on the little table beside me. The chocolate on top of the brownies glistens, but I can't eat now, not even a bite. "I'm not hungry."

"Surely--" she starts, but I shake my head, pull the covers closer around me, peering out of the blanket mounded over my head. Likely I look crazy, but Sabine says nothing, only lifts the tray up and holds it in front of her heart.

"Greta." She looks over her shoulder, back toward the pink-and-blue room. It's empty. Robert isn't there. "Greta, you have to eat these," she says, but I shake my head again, grip the blanket tighter.

After a long, sharp moment, Sabine walks backwards to the door and sets the tray down right on the floor. "I'm going to leave this here," she says,

her eyes shining...hurt. "Just eat when you're hungry, okay?"

She bows her head, closes the door, and I stare at the space she filled for a minute or two. Then I throw off the blanket and pace the floor back and forth, back and forth, just like a caged rat. Sometimes Daddy got lucky and caught a rat in his trap, and we four fed on rat stew for a good week.

I stay away from the windows, and I don't touch the brownies--just glancing at that gooey chocolate makes my stomach churn--and I worry. A lot. I worry about Han, and I worry about Ragers. I worry about whether we're safe here or not. *How* did that Rager get in, and did he have *friends*? What if he's calling up his friends right now, like that Rager in the Heap did with me and Han?

I bite my nails until my fingers bleed. I wish I had someone to talk this over with. I wish Han would *wake up*.

When the shadows upon the floor, seeping through the curtains, are long and low, I know the sun is thinking about setting.

And that's when Robert opens my door.

"I came to check on you," he says from the doorway. He didn't knock.

I stare at him, but he doesn't even raise an eyebrow at me. "If you don't mind, Greta," he says softly, "would you show me your neck?"

"My neck?" I narrow my eyes. "You think I'm infected."

"You've been acting oddly today," he says, folding his arms. "We just want to make sure. That's all."

I angle my chin up, show him my neck, even fold my ears down for him so he can look at the skin behind.

Robert nods, waves his hand at me. "All right, you're fine."

"I know I am," I say, all riled, and then we're just staring at each other.

"Can I come in?" he asks. I shrug my shoulders and slump down on the bed.

Robert closes the door behind him, and then he's sitting in front of me on the floor, folding his legs up, loads more graceful than my brother ever was—is.

I miss Han so much. I rub at my eyes.

"Do you..." Robert presses his hands to his knees. "Do you like my sister?"

Of all the things I figured he might say—"Did you spy on us last night?" or "Eat some of these brownies!"—this question never held space in my mind. My jaw hangs all slack and stupid until I huff out, nose flaring.

"Yeah, 'course I like her," I say, but Robert's shaking his head.

"I think you know what I'm asking here, Greta."

I do. I know exactly what he's asking, but I don't know *why* he's asking it, and I've got a lot of things to worry over.

But I guess part of me's been aching to confess.

So I say, "Yes, I *like* her," and I make the "like" come out louder than the other words.

"I knew you did. The reason I say it," he says, and he clears his throat, "is that my sister has been through an awful lot. She doesn't let on much that she has." And then he's looking up at me with sharp, piercing blue eyes. "So just be gentle with her, okay? You're not infected. I know you've been through a lot, too. But be kind to her, if you like her. And if one thing leads to another, well—we need more of that in this world right now. But I can tell you for certain that pushing someone away isn't a good way to woo them. Believe me—I'd know."

I squint at him, looking real close.

I guess I didn't like Robert before. But maybe he's okay.

Then I remember how he dragged that Rager across the floor, and I open my mouth to ask him what's going on—ask him outright—but I don't get the words out because Sabine opens up the door.

"What's all this?" she asks cheerfully, striding in, wearing a different apron this time. It's pink-and-white checked with green gingham pockets shaped like hearts.

Robert stands up and nods toward me.

"We were just talking about you," he winks at Sabine, and she looks to me real quick, I guess trying to figure out what we might have been saying. I shrug casual-like, and stand up, too, and then I feel real stupid.

"I'll leave you two. Always more wood to be put on the fire," says Robert, and then he gives his sister a quick squeeze and moves past her, out of the room. He moves fast.

Sabine stares down at the rejected tray of brownies. "Do you want cupcakes...or cake? Pie?" She's watching me with a nothing expression on her face.

I shake my head, miserable as an empty stomach. I want to ask Sabine what happened down there in the Pit. I want to ask her—again—what's wrong with my brother. I want to ask her all sorts of things, but I just stare at my feet like a fool.

Outside, a Rager scrapes its nails over the window glass. Sabine shivers, and then I'm stepping forward in this unthinking kind of way, and I offer her the blanket from my bed.

She looks at me for a long moment before she smiles my favorite of her smiles—the wide one that makes her look all lit up. It's not strained or worried or hurt like some of her other smiles. It's real. And real beautiful.

I drape the blanket around her shoulders, and I take in how close we are right at the same time she does, I think. I'm not an expert at any of this stuff. I'm making it all up as I go along. But as I reach forward and put a shaky hand right there at the curve of her shoulder and neck, looping my fingers over her bare skin, I think I feel some butterflies in my ribs. *Something's* fluttering.

And then *everything* just flutters right out of my mind as I move in and kiss Sabine.

I didn't plan for this. I don't think you *could* plan for anything so nice. She tastes sweet, and that doesn't surprise me, not one little bit. Her mouth is warm and soft, and it's better than cake because she's kissing me back, and there's this lingering rush of happy in my stomach that really is like butterflies—like a *thousand* butterflies.

Sabine puts her arms around my neck, and I put a hand to her waist, all uncertain, but a bubbly sort of feeling races through me as my fingers find her curve there, and it's like we were always meant to hold each other like this, *just* like this.

She's smiling under my mouth, and I break away a little. My heart thuds in every last part of me. Sabine tilts her head to the side, looks up at me through those lashes like she sometimes does, but now it drives me crazy in this brand-new, wonderful way. I grin at her, too, and then my forehead is touching hers, because I can't look at her anymore; I feel so bashful.

She takes a step back, laughing, and wraps her arms around my shoulders, holding on to me so tight. "I'm glad you came to our candy house, Greta," she whispers in my ear in this soft, sweet voice. "I'm so very glad."

I start to smile again, but when I look at her, I stop, surprised, because there's this one, lone tear tracing a line down her cheek. I reach up, and I wipe it away.

"I am, too," I tell her. "Glad, I mean." And it boggles my mind when I think on how hard it was to get here, how almost impossible it seemed that we might find anywhere safe to escape those Ragers.

The notion that there might be someone, anyone, anywhere, I'd like to *kiss*--I'd never thought of such a thing, because such a thing just wasn't likely.

I give Sabine a little squeeze that makes her smile. She's wiping at her eyes, moving away, clearing her throat.

"Are you hungry *now*?" she asks me, and this time I nod, because I am hungry, yeah—nowhere near as hungry as I was in the Heap, just a small sort of hungry—but it's important to Sabine somehow that I eat, and I want to please her.

A moment later, she brings me in some cupcakes from the next room, and we both curl up on my bed, knees touching as I eat. I take little bites now. I think I'm learning manners despite myself.

"Han's still sleeping peacefully," Sabine tells me, fingering a little silver chain on her wrist. There's a funny-looking animal dangling from it that kind of looks like a horse, but there's something pointy sticking right out of its forehead.

"I'm worried about him. Real worried. You know I am." I put down a half-finished cupcake, crinkling its wrapper up in my hand. "Do you think... Do you think he needs some doctoring? Momma always did the doctoring, so I don't know. But maybe he's hurt? Maybe that chase was just too much for him. I mean, I've tried shaking him and hollering in his ear. He won't wake up." I nibble on one of my fingernails.

"He's not hurt," Sabine says, a bit too quick. "He'll be okay, Greta. He'll wake up soon. You have to trust me."

"What's that got to do with trusting you?" I ask her, but she's shaking her head, urging me to finish the rest of my cupcake. I sigh, but I eat it because it's not chocolate, and I'm sick to death of chocolate.

"I have a feeling," she says, as I chew, "that if you're patient, you'll be...pleasantly surprised. I think he'll wake up any day now, well and rested because of that long sleep."

It's true I don't know anything about doctoring, but none of that sounds natural to me. I bite my tongue and watch her out of the corner of my eye finagling with her silver chain, nervous-like.

I'm confused, that's what I am. That kiss was the sweetest thing that ever happened to me. I really like Sabine. She's kind and smart and funny and pretty, and she's soft in all the right places. I love her smile.

But my brother won't wake up, and she keeps wanting me to eat cupcakes, which is all sorts of crazy. And she trapped a Rager, and I don't know why. And my gut keeps telling me not to ask her about it, so I won't.

But I've got to get some answers somehow.

*

It's pitch dark. Sabine left a long time ago, but her scent lingers in my room. It's like sugar and piecrust and apples and berries and niceness. I keep burying my nose in my blanket, catching a whiff there, as I lay on my bed, butterflies beating against my bones something fierce.

I can't stop thinking about her.

I close my eyes to the darkness.

Tonight, I'll get down to the bottom of all of this, and then there won't be anything scary or strange to get in the way. I'll figure out for myself how that Rager got in, probably see that they have traps set out, and then I'll just calm my stupid doubts, and everything'll be fine.

And Sabine's right—Han will wake up, and then *I'll* be the one making fun of *him* for sleeping so long and acting all lazy.

Okay. I got my plan. I'm gonna do it.

Earlier, I asked Sabine, all sly-like, where Robert and her go for some shut-eye. She laughed a little, told me their bedrooms are right off the Pit, like I thought. And that they go to bed around midnight.

There's a clock in the room with the pink-and-blue table. I know where the hands go for midnight, so I got that covered. When it's *past* midnight, I'll just go down, do some snooping, find out what I need to find out. And then I can stop fretting.

I can't wait to stop fretting.

Time drags. I wait so long, I can't bear it anymore. I get up and move into the next room. The light in here is always too bright. I squint in at Han through his door—still sleeping, still wearing that stupid grin on his face. I open his door up to check on him, because I have to, because I'm too nervous not to. I brush my hand over his cheek, and it feels so cold. My fingers come away with crumbs on them. I bend close to kiss his forehead.

Oh, Han—please wake up. Please.

Back out beneath the flickering light, the hands on the clock point to past midnight. I take a deep breath. It's now or never, like Daddy used to say when he went out into the woods to forage for food.

I'm gonna go. I'm gonna do it.

My stomach is churning something awful. I bite at my fingernail, and then I push through the swinging door and tiptoe down the long red-and-white striped hall. I wait at the end of the hall, and I listen hard and close, but there's no sound from the other side of the door, save for those machines. It's unnerving, how they keep making noise, even when Robert and Sabine stop working with them. We didn't have anything so fancy as machines in the Heap, but I'd read some paper scraps about them. I just never guessed they were so noisy.

I open the door, and I peer down into the Pit, moving my eyes real quick to check for Robert and Sabine. They aren't there, not anywhere I can see, so I brave the rickety walkway and scamper all the way down the steps and right into the Pit itself.

I haven't been down here, had no need to be up 'til now. There are doors off the main floor. I sneak behind a whirring box. Any one of those doors might be Sabine or Robert's bedrooms, and I don't want them to see me, because then all sorts of uncomfortableness will happen.

I've decided that, if I'm found, I'll say I was sleepwalking and hope to high heaven that they'll believe me. I didn't come *close* to believing myself when I whispered the words aloud in my room, testing out how they sounded. But I've always been a rotten liar. Once I told Han that there was a great big fish with teeth as sharp as knives flapping around in the well outside, and he didn't even go look and see 'cause he knew I was fibbing. Really, it was just a jagged old stump that *looked* like a fish--to me, anyway.

I don't quite know what I'm looking for here, save for the Rager. If he's still inside, *that's* when there'll be uncomfortable questions, 'cause I'll be the one asking them. No one's *crazy* enough to keep a Rager in the same place they sleep, are they? Sabine and Robert sure don't seem crazy. Well, besides making me eat all of those cupcakes.

I guess I'll have to peer through the windows in the doors down here.

I walk around the whole room first. There's nothing in the Pit but the ovens and the fridges and the other machines that Sabine says make the pies and cakes. I'm curious about the fridges, so I try to open one. I've been

wondering about the ingredients for cakes. But the door won't budge, and I give up after a few tugs.

Now my skin's prickling. This is kind of nerve-wracking, sneaking around down here. It's not a forbidden place, but it feels like it is, and Sabine and Robert don't know what I'm doing. I *am* sneaking. I rub my hands over my arms, trying to smooth down the little goosebumps.

Finally, I peek through the window in the first door to my left. I don't see anything much beyond darkness inside, shadows. I could go in to have a look around, but... I breathe deep. What if this is Robert or Sabine's room? I go over my sleepwalking story in my head one more time, grit my teeth and open the door, slinking into the room, all crouched. It's a smallish space with lots of boxes stacked on top of one another, all tidy, in neat, tall rows. Nothing too interesting.

The next room is just more of the same. And the third. And the fourth. When I get to the fifth room, I pause, because there's something like a bed in there, I think, and there's a shape on the bed that somehow makes me think of Robert. I keep myself calm and back away quietly.

He's asleep. It's okay.

But I'm on tiptoes now.

I peer through the next window. More boxes.

I almost groan. I'm *frustrated*. I don't know what I thought I'd find, truth be told, but none of this—boxes and boxes and more boxes--is it.

Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe that means they kicked the Rager out, and I've been silly carrying on about it like this.

Well, I'm not out of rooms yet.

I look through another window and see a small bed, like the one I sleep on. And there's Sabine. She has a candle lit, and she's propped up one elbow, reading a book. I'm the creepiest person in the whole world, 'cause I watch her for a second. She's beautiful with her yellow hair all mounded on the pillow like that. Yeah, she's the prettiest thing I've ever seen, and I move away and lean against the metal wall, hand pressed to my heart. The butterflies are awake and won't stop their fluttering. I breathe out, long and low.

All right. I can do this. Just three more rooms.

I peer into the first of the three. Boxes. And the second. Surprise! Boxes.

As I near the third room, I think I'm feeling relieved. I'm so glad that there's nothing down here, that I've been stupid, borrowing trouble.

I peer through the last window on the last door, and I'm ready to look at more boxes.

I stop. I just stop. *Everything* stops, the annoying click and whir of the machines fading away until it's as if they never made any noise in the first place.

There's a dim light on in the room, and there's a cot close to the door. And there's a lump laying on that cot, covered all over in a white cloth. The lump looks human.

My hand is on the doorknob before I take in what I'm doing, what I'm really *doing*, because I'm opening up the door, and I'm stepping right inside, and there's a little *click*, and then more lights come on, bright ceiling lights all the way down the length of the room, far away.

This room is big, much bigger than the others. Bigger than the Pit. There are rows upon rows of cots. Rows upon *rows* of them, all metal frames and smooth white sheets.

Person-shaped lumps under some of those sheets.

I stand very still, as still as I can. But I'm shivering. It's colder in this room than it is out in the Pit. But that's not all of it. I'm shivering because I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to go up to this first cot, and I'm going to peel back that white cloth. I know I'm going to do it, and I can't stop myself, even though part of me wants to back up real bad, wants to leave this room, go upstairs, crawl into my own bed, and forget I've ever seen any of this. My stomach's all agitated; it's starting to make little sounds. I wrap my arms around my middle and swallow hard.

I have to know. *I have to*. Me and Han, we're living in this building, and I have to know who—or *what*—we're living with.

I step closer and closer to the cot, taking tiny steps, heart booming loud in my ears.

None of the sheets is moving, not with a twitch or a breath. I pick up the corner of one sheet, and I don't peel it back slowly—I can't. I tear it off suddenly, like I'm crazed, and then I'm staring down at this naked woman. This *dead*, naked woman.

I fall backwards. I don't even put the sheet back. I fall right backwards, down to the hard floor, and I'm rocking back and forth, back and forth.

Oh, Han. *Han*.

I didn't listen to him breathing tonight.

His cheek felt so cold beneath my hand.

He's not *sleeping*. I've been such a fool. He's dead. *Dead*. Like all of these poor people. Dead!

I stand up, cupping my hand over my mouth, trying to hold back the sobs. I see crumbs on this woman's mouth, pink and green crumbs.

Cupcake crumbs.

Oh, shit, *shit*! Oh, god. All of it comes together in sickening little snaps in my head.

Han ate the food. Han is dead.

These people ate the food. They're real dead.

Sabine wouldn't stop shoving that cake on me, that awful cake, that chocolate, those cookies, and oh, *god*, she was trying to kill me, too! And I don't understand why, *why* they'd want to hurt Han, why they'd want to hurt me. Why they hurt all these people.

I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here *now*, while I can, while Robert and Sabine are sleeping. I don't have any plan. There is no plan. I only know I have to leave tonight, and maybe I can hole up in another building in this city, because *I survive*--that's what I do. And Han is dead. My brother is dead. The only family I had is dead.

I can't help it. I sob. It's a small sound, but it echoes in the big room, and so I'm rushing out into the Pit, but everything's gone wrong, because Sabine is standing there, *Sabine* in her bare feet, holding the book to her chest, blue eyes round, nightdress billowing around her, her back to the ovens.

"Greta..." she whispers, and she looks over my shoulder, back to the room, to the long lines of bodies.

I stare at Sabine, stare at her so hard, and I'm so *angry*, I don't know what to do. There's a big stack of pokers beside me—Robert must use them to prod the logs in the fires—and I'm picking one up now. A long, sharp one.

Han is gone.

Sabine is *gone*. The Sabine I thought she was is gone. She wasn't *good*. I was so wrong. So wrong.

I'm pointing my poker at her stomach now. I snarl, and it sounds inhuman. Sounds like a Rager, 'cause I'm full up with rage.

"Greta, please," Sabine whispers. The book drops from her hands, and her hands hang limp at her sides. Those hands touched me. *I let her touch me.*

I snarl again.

"You killed him," I whisper, a dead-flat whisper.

Sabine's shaking her head, her eyes wide, tears falling from them.

I don't *care*. *She killed my brother.*

"Please..." she whispers again, holding her hands out to me.

I brandish the poker at her, push her off, but I'm crying, too. I never hurt anything before. Lots of times I imagined what I'd do if I found those Ragers that got Mary. I thought of how I'd hurt them.

But I don't want to hurt Sabine, not like that.

But Sabine hurt my brother.

Oh, god. I scrub at my eyes, and I think of all the times Sabine offered me sweets, knowing full well that they were poisoned, that they would make me die.

"You killed my brother," I wail, and I sound so pitiful, I'm angry at *myself* for it.

Sabine's outline is backlit by the flames of the oven.

"Please listen to me. I know this looks terrible. Robert was right. I'm so sorry. I should have told you the truth. I didn't want to upset you, frighten you. You're so afraid of the Ragers... But please believe me: your brother *isn't dead*. We didn't kill him, Greta. We were helping you, both of you--"

"Lies!" I hiss, and I step forward with the poker, and Sabine steps back, nearer to the oven. Her nightdress is close now to the licking, curling flames, and she's shuddering.

Sweat drips down the small of my back. My hands are shaking. I can't hurt her. She killed my brother. I can't hurt her. It should be easy—she's *evil*. Bad. She killed all these people. She killed--

"Please believe me," she whispers, voice quiet. "Please believe, Greta, that we were helping them. It's wonderful, actually..." And she's smiling now, though it's awful-looking, crazy-looking. "Greta, we found the cure for Ragers--"

I laugh, spite making my lips twist. I raise the poker higher, holding it with two hands now. "I'm not stupid. I *know* there's no cure for Ragers--"

"All those people in there were Ragers once," says Greta, talking fast. "Greta, your brother was infected."

"Inf—Han...no..." My mouth is hanging wide open. "That's not *possible*." It isn't. We were together, always together. Always careful. We were in the house together, and we rode through the Heap together. We were never even up close to any Ragers 'til we rode our bikes here to the metal forest.

Rode our bikes through that horde of Ragers.

I stare at Sabine for a very long, hazy moment, thinking.

Could Han have been bitten by a Rager while he was on his bike? He was a mite peaked when we crashed into the candy shop.

But he'd looked so peaceful sleeping...

What if that just meant he was dying real slow, poisoned to death, and I'd been too stupid to notice?

Momma told me to trust no one. That's one of the rules. That's how we survive.

"My brother and I..." Sabine is saying now, wringing her hands together. "We worked on the cure for a long time. We lived with an old man, a scientist. He was a sort of father to us. He taught us...schooled us. He was getting close to finding a cure; every day it was all he could talk about, about fat proteins and... We were his assistants. Until he died."

She looks at me through her lashes, and I almost lose my grip on the poker.

"We figured out the cure, Robert and me, years and years later. We studied all of the notes, tried again and again—hundreds of times, Greta--and...we finished his work. We *found the cure*. And if the Ragers eat the cure, they go to sleep for a little while. Their vital signs weaken, fade down to almost nothing, as the process reverses, as the virus is devoured... And they wake up after the final phase, a twenty-four hour period of deep coma, *cured*. The twenty-four hour period is almost over," Sabine says softly, "for Han. He'll wake up soon. He'll be as good as new—better—and he'll be cured."

Something darkens within me, and I tighten my hold on the poker. "If this works so well, where are all of the other cured people?"

"They—they left..." she stutters. "They've all left. They wanted to go back to their lives, to their homes or their families." But I'm just shaking my head.

"You've never cured *anyone*--"

"Greta." Her voice is a whisper. There are tears streaming down her face, but I can't tell if it's from feeling sorry or from standing so close to the oven. "I would never do anything to hurt you. I've done everything I could to *help* you. From the moment we met, I knew I... I care about you. There's..." Her hands harden into fists at her sides. "I understand that it's difficult to believe. But I'm asking you," she says gently, "to trust me."

I stare at the oven behind her. I could push her in. I could push her in and shut the door, and I could leave, escape, while she burned.

The idea shocks me something awful. I could do it. I *would* do it if I knew she was wicked. But I don't know that.

Do I trust her? I don't know that, either.

I don't know.

I don't know what to do.

I drop the poker. It clatters on the floor.

I'm not going to hurt her.

And suddenly Robert is in his doorway, blinking sleep from his eyes.

"What's going on?" he asks, but I'm turning away, turning fast, because I can't look at either of them. I take the stairs two at a time, run over the walkway, out the door, and then I'm through the red-and-white hall, and then I'm at Han's bedside, and I'm on my knees next to him, pressing my face into his blanket.

I can't hear him breathing.

I sit up, take his cold hand in mine, and I cry.

I thought I'd lost everything...

Have I?

Trust me, she said. *Believe me*, she said.

I...I really want to.

*

Greta...

Greta...

"Greta."

Someone's shaking my shoulders hard, and I say, "Ow!" and try to straighten up, but my head feels fuzzy, and my back's all stiff. I guess I fell asleep, and I can't move much because I slept funny, but suddenly I'm

moving. Someone grabs me up in a great big bear hug, pushes the air right out of me. I whine a little and rub at my eyes.

Han is squishing me, squishing me 'til I can't breathe, and I start to push him away, yawning—and then I stop yawning, and I take in that *Han is not dead*, and Han is *hugging* me, and I shriek, and I hug back, and we're both laughing, crazy laughing, tears coming out of our eyes.

And then we sober up, and we just stare.

"We're...alive," Han says, but he doesn't sound like he believes it much. I guess he's waiting for me to nod, like he's not going to believe it until I agree with him, so I nod, agree. We *are* alive.

He's alive.

I grab him real quick and push away the hair behind his ear. There are no spidery gray lines there. There's nothing.

Han's not infected.

And he's alive.

I breathe deep, and I sigh, and then I'm standing, helping Han up, too. He's slow; his legs wobble like pudding. I'll have to tell Han about pudding. I help him sit down on the edge of the bed.

"What happened?" he asks me. "I just remember the bikes and the Ragers. How did we get here? I mean, we're safe, yeah?" He's looking all over, taking in the walls surrounding us.

"Yeah, we're safe," I tell him, and I tousle his hair—I know he hates that, but he doesn't moan about it now—and I grin at him, just a little grin. "You lay back down, okay? I'll go get you something to eat."

"You're joshing me," he says, eyes wide as pies, but he lays back down, anyway. "Really, Greta? Food? Real food?"

"Yeah," I smile. "There's food."

When I'm out in the room with the blue-and-pink table, I lean against the wall, raking my hands through my hair, over my head, eyes closed.

Han's awake.

Sabine told the truth.

What did I do last night? I was angry. Real angry. I thought she'd killed all those people. I thought she'd killed Han. Fear eats up my stomach in little bites. I said some rotten things to Sabine. I swung a poker at her.

I didn't know. I didn't trust her, not enough.

I straighten up. I'm going to go down there right now, and I'm going to tell her how sorry I am--

Sabine's standing in front of the swinging door. She stares at me with her blue, blue eyes. Her hands are folded up, and her face seems kind of folded up, too. Sad, I guess. I can feel her sadness.

"He's awake?" she whispers, scared-like. Scared of me?

"I... Sabine, please... Oh, please forgive me!" I cross the space between us in two leaps, and I'm on my knees before her. I don't touch her. I just kneel there, heart hammering. "I was afraid," I tell her, and she crouches down beside me, and she's hugging me, holding me so close I can smell her sweetness. My sobs are muffled against her shoulder. "I've been so afraid. I've never been anything *but* afraid," I say, and all of the anger, all of the fear, all of the...the *everything*—it just comes pouring out of me along with my tears. I cry for a good long while.

"I should have told you from the beginning. I'm so sorry that I didn't," she whispers into my ear. "I didn't want to make you worry about your brother... I didn't want you to be afraid of the Ragers down there. And, Greta, I had to make absolutely certain that you weren't infected, either." She bows her head against me. "That's why I kept feeding you the food, the food with the cure in it. We had to make sure. For your safety and our own."

I nod, nose running. I rub my arm over my face, stare down at my lap as we break apart. I'm all numb.

"All those people down there..." I say, and I'm looking at her, watching her close. She sits back on her heels, and she smiles that Sabine smile I love so much. She means that smile, and my butterflies flap around real fast.

I smile a little, too.

"A few of them have woken up, the Ragers we caught the same day we met you," she tells me quietly, offering her hand. "Would you like to go down, Greta? Would you like to see them?"

I think for a minute, and then I nod, because I want to see them being human again. The Ragers--they never looked like anything but monsters to me. But these ones aren't monsters anymore. My eyes need to see that.

"We're going to spread the cure, Greta. You'll see. The power is shifting. We're going to take the world back from the Ragers." She has so much passion in her voice, I can't do anything but smile at her, and the bashfulness comes back; I'm looking at my hands again, her fingers curled in my palms.

"We'll do it together, Greta. All of us," she whispers, and I look up at her then. "All of us together."

"Yeah," I say, "together." And the thrill of that single word fires through me.

I'm not afraid anymore.

I'm *safe*.

I trust Sabine.

"Maybe..." I say, but I almost can't say it aloud, can't let myself have this hope.

"Maybe what, Greta?" Sabine's eyes look so gentle, so soft.

"Maybe, someday, we'll find my parents...if they're Ragers now. Maybe we could help them, cure them..."

"Maybe." Sabine squeezes my hand.

Like we're one creature, we rise up, and I duck forward, daring to give Sabine a kiss on her cheek. She looks at me through those pretty lashes, and then she threads her fingers through mine, wraps her arm around my waist, and she's kissing me.

Here's what she tastes like: cake and pies and cookies and brownies and pastries and niceness. A bit of chocolate, too. I think I like chocolate again.

She tastes *good*.

We go below together, and we watch a brand-new world wake up.

FIN

abOUT THE AUTHORs

Jennifer Diemer and Elora Bishop (AKA Sarah Diemer) are the authors of several lesbian novels, novellas and short stories. They have been married for five years, and *legally* married for almost one year (thank you, NY state!). They live, love and create together in their purple-doored cottage in the country, with their many magical and very furry children. They are professional fairies (<http://www.thefabletribe.com>).

To find out more about their novels, novellas and short stories, please visit:

<http://elorabishop.wordpress.com> and <http://www.oceanid.org/jenn>.

Find Elora on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/elorabishop>

Find Jenn on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/expectangels>

Please sign up for Jennifer and Sarah/Elora's newsletter—they will only contact you when they release a new novel, novella or short story, and you will be the first to know about the release! Sign up at <http://www.oceanid.org>.